

**In the Shadow of Elisabeth: A history of the battle for Bilston Iron and
Steelworks, c. 1967-1980**

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Abstract

In July 1981, the last sections of the state-owned Bilston steelworks were unceremoniously shut, thus ending two centuries of hot metal production in the Black Country, the onetime workshop of the world. The devastating closure of this profitable facility occurred despite a decade-long grassroots defence campaign spearheaded by local rank and file workers. Using previously unexplored primary source material and oral testimony, this thesis provides a detailed analysis of the battle to save Bilston works.

It explores how, in the midst of the 1970s steel crisis, an exceptionally diligent type of worker activist adapted traditional production practices to ensure the survival of the plant. With Bilston's steelmen maintaining their uniquely profitable record, bungling industry officials conspired to marginalise their plant in order to justify a deeply flawed state-sponsored rationalisation programme. At the heart of this process were the activities of a senior and divisional management team who systematically rationalised the Bilston facility, whilst seeking to cynically undermine shop-floor solidarity. The thesis, therefore, highlights the ways in which management prerogative impacted the lives of steelworkers and their families.

The work critically examines the actions of a small band of shop stewards who mobilised into a multi-union local action committee tasked with saving 2,300 jobs. A key focus here is their chosen strategic framework. As experienced activists, they initially recruited a cross-party coalition of political figures to convince sympathetic policymakers to absorb the facility into a medium-term operating plan. With the

unfolding crisis prompting a less forgiving political landscape, Bilston's enterprising shop stewards made a tactical transition, engaging in concerted collective direct action to persuade conservative union leaders to petition decisionmakers on their behalf.

The thesis offers a critique of institutional behaviour, revealing how both the state and moderate steel unions undermined Bilston by repeatedly acquiescing to management prerogative. Abandoned by union and Government bureaucrats, the campaign eventually crumbled from within. The research identifies the ways in which ambivalent officials merely sat idly by as management undermined a profitable state concern before insidiously harassing its conscientious employees. The thesis concludes with an account of the legacy of the battle for Bilston works, demonstrating how redundant steelmen, politicised by their experiences, played essential roles in the post-industrial social, cultural and political culture of the town.

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Industria et Lahore Edurat Re Bilstonia

Acronyms

ADC	Annual Delegate Conference
AISWGB	Associated Iron and Steel Workers of Great Britain
AOP	Annual Operating Plan
AUEW	Amalgamated Union of Engineering Works
BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BCA	Bilston Community Association
BCC	Bilston Community College
BISAKTA	British Iron, Steel and Kindred Association
BISF	British Iron and Steel Federation
BISPA	British Iron and Steel Producers Association
BITA	British Iron Trade Association
BJUAC (or action committee)	Bilston Joint Union Action Committee
BMA	British Mining Association
BOS	Basic Oxygen Steelmaking
BSC (or Corporation)	British Steel Corporation
BWB	Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CLP	Constituency Labour Party
CNC	Central Negotiating Committee
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain

CSEU	Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
EC (or Executive)	Executive Council
ETU	Electrical Trades Union
FBU	Fire Brigade Union
GMWU	General and Municipal Workers Union
GWV	Guaranteed Working Week
HLF	Heritage Lottery Funded
ILP	Independent Labour Party
ISB	Iron and Steel Board
ISTC (or Confederation)	Iron and Steel Trades Confederation
ITSOE	In the Shadow of Elisabeth
IWP	Indian Workers Party
JAPAC	Joint Accident Prevention Advisory Committee
JCC	Joint Consultative Committee
JPC	Joint Planning Committee
JSC	Joint Steering Committee
JURUE	Joint Unit for Research on the Urban Environment
JWP	Joint Working Party
MRC	Modern Record Centre
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NAC	National Action Committee

NACRO	National Association for the Care of Offenders
NCB	National Coal Board
NCCC	National Craftsmen Coordinating Committee
NEC	National Executive Council
NJAC	National Joint Advisory Council
NSTS	New Springvale Training Scheme
NUB	National Union of Blastfurnacemen Ore Miners, Coke Workers and Kindred Trades
OH	Open Hearth (furnace)
PAYE	Pay as You Earn
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
Q-BOP	bottom blown oxygen
ROSAC	Retention of Steelmaking at Corby
S&L	Stewarts and Lloyds
S&TP	Stocksbridge & Tinsley Park
SCLV	Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory
SCNI	Select Committee on Nationalised Industries
SIMA (or Association)	Steel Industry Management Association
SISI	Staffordshire Iron and Steel Institute
SWP	Socialist Workers Party
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
t/p/a	tonnes per annum
TUCSICC (or Steel Committee)	Trade Union Congress Steel and Iron Consultative Committee

UCATT	Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians
UPW	Union of Post Office Workers
USC	United Steels Companies
USW	United Steel Workers
UWM	Unemployed Workers Movement
WAC	works action committees
WB&DTUC	Wolverhampton, Bilston and District Trades Council
WCA	Wolverhampton City Archives
WMBC	Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council
WMCC	West Midlands County Council
YOP	Youth Opportunity Programme

Introduction

As part of an ambitious industrial renewal policy intended to reinvigorate Britain's post-war manufacturing base, Harold Wilson's Labour Government nationalised the UK iron and steel trade in July 1967. On vesting day, a newly formed British Steel Corporation (BSC) became the second largest industrial enterprise in the western world, employing a staggering 270,000 employees across 21 fully-integrated facilities producing a theoretical capacity of 29m t/p/a. State control prompted an unprecedented wave of optimism to flow through a strategically vital manufacturing sector that, under private ownership, had been badly mismanaged. Nationalisation, on the other hand, was expected to provide a platform from which planners and Whitehall officials could expand and reconstruct the industry in an organised and socially responsible manner. Whilst all major production units were initially safeguarded during the Corporation's formative years, this would change over the course of the 1970s as the industry, saddled with a defective long-term development programme and suffering from commercial and operational mismanagement, was hit by an unprecedented crisis.

Following a series of expedited rationalisation initiatives that culminated in a plant closure stampede in the second half of the decade, the industry entered the 1980s with only eight major sites having survived the cull. Of the tens of thousands of steelworkers falling victim to this exceptional process of deindustrialisation, approximately 3,000 were once employed at Bilston, a site in a region of the West Midlands known as the Black Country.¹

¹ It was Elihu Burritt who originally popularised the term 'Black Country'. Writing in 1868, the US Consul for Birmingham specifically described the region as a, "nebula of coal and iron towns, making one great

This thesis chronicles the so-called battle for Bilston steelworks from the perspective of unionised employees who orchestrated a decade-long grassroots campaign of shop-floor resistance.² By shining a spotlight on their personal experiences, it represents a valuable addition to the study of the history of work, workers' organisation and trade unionism. Although the thesis is primarily an exploration of the workplace and the extra-workplace activities of the rank and file, it does not disregard national political developments. It therefore provides an analysis of how the state, senior industry officials, trade unions and other stakeholders interacted with Bilston's steelmen.³ Through this institutional framework, the experiences of local workers are positioned within the wider political, economic, and social contexts of 1970s Britain.⁴

As an investigation into workplace organisation, accommodation and resistance, the bulk of the thesis focuses on reconstructing the activities of an informal workers' group created to block closure and persuade policymakers to extend the lifespan of their plant. Over a period of ten years, the so-called BJUAC coordinated a multi-faceted and determined campaign of resistance. As an inquiry into their activities, the thesis

cloud of industrial communities" between Wolverhampton and Birmingham. See E. Burritt, *Walks in the Black Country and its Green Borderland* (London, 1868), p. 344.

² This includes all manual and supervisory grades, middle and departmental managers, the vast majority of which supported the fight against closure.

³ Adopting a broad-church approach, the work places the experiences of Bilston's workers and their unions in their local and national contexts.

⁴ Between 1973 and 1979, the year iron and steel production permanently ceased at Bilston, the UK experienced the lowest growth rate in the western world. Unemployment levels rose more or less continuously throughout the period, with larger organisations rationalising production and reducing manning levels accordingly.

addresses questions relating to how and why workers adapt, organise and, ultimately, fight to survive during an extended period of industrial decline.

A core research theme is to identify and scrutinise the tactical framework adopted by the BJUAC, a multi-union body led by a cohort of politically conscious and community-minded shop stewards. Critically examining several distinctive strategic phases of the campaign, the thesis demonstrates how they originally based their defence on the plant's impressive financial record, responding to the onset of the crisis by introducing a whole raft of cost-cutting and marketing initiatives. Early chapters, therefore, seek to identify ways in which diligent and highly skilled production workers adapted traditional workplace practices in order to survive and flourish in recessionary conditions.

With the actions of senior industry officials deliberately undermining profitability, the thesis outlines how the Bilston men recalibrated their position by calling for the retention of steelmaking on commercial and industrial lines. Underpinning this tactical transition was a decision to work within the parameters of the industry's consultative apparatus. The move saw shop stewards join forces with management to produce two detailed survival plans that convincingly called for investment. The research, therefore, seeks to extend our understanding of how rank and file workers engaged in acts of shop-floor accommodation. Likewise, it determines why a workforce with little history of self-organisation was compelled to participate in collective action. Despite occasionally engaging in militant acts of industrial protest, instances of radicalism were nonetheless extremely rare. As such, the thesis represents a detailed study into the

behaviour of a moderate rank and file compelled into participating in orthodox and sometimes unorthodox activities in a desperate bid to protect their livelihoods.

An early strategy adopted by the Bilston men was to employ a powerful cross-party lobby of civic leaders, community stakeholders and sympathetic politicians to petition policymakers on their behalf. Later, when faced with the prospect of a much less accommodating political and economic environment, pragmatic campaign leaders directed a more extensive and sophisticated process of outreach, enlisting the support of domestic and foreign experts, sympathetic media correspondents, respected academics and even the opposition Conservative Party. The Bilston men engaged in peaceful direct action by taking their campaign of resistance onto the streets of Britain, organising huge public rallies whilst also occupying Fleet Street with a sit-down protest vigil. The research, therefore, places the battle for steelmaking in its extra-workplace context, examining ways in which local workers sought to manipulate national political, industrial and trade union elites into supporting their cause.

These actions, it is established, were also used to galvanise an under-siege workforce that, at various stages of campaign, displayed signs of battle-weariness. The thesis considers what methods Bilston's shop stewards used to mobilise internal support and sustain shop-floor solidarity, with more conventional measures such as mass meetings or branch communiques combined with the aforementioned instances of industrial or public protest. Despite the BJUAC preserving a united front through solidaristic collective action, the defence would eventually disintegrate from within, as financial self-interest and sectionalism took hold. The relationship between the action

committee leadership and the plant's rank and file is a principal topic of the study, with accusations of undemocratic behaviour and coercion probed in some detail.

The post-industrial period, beginning in May 1979, is explored, with the thesis determining how the BJUAC, having reformed as a workers' welfare cooperative, dominated Bilston's social, cultural and political landscapes until their retirement in May 2008. Housed in an abandoned works facility, they attended the needs of a community devastated by the loss of their primary industry. Politicised by defeat and then the policies of the Margaret Thatcher Governments, the Bilston men spearheaded several grassroots 'right to work' protests. This process would culminate in June 1987 with the election of their Chairman, Dennis Turner, to Parliament. Whilst in Westminster he would seek to use his past experiences as the head of both the BJUAC and the workers' cooperative to reduce poverty by encouraging the self-advancement of unemployed workers through the provision of open access tertiary education. The final section, therefore, examines how the decade long anti-closure campaign directly impacted the BJUAC's post-industrial behaviour. In this context, the thesis delves into the social, political and cultural legacy of the battle for Bilston steelworks.

Another key overall aim of the thesis is to place the men's activities in their full industrial context, thereby uncovering how the policies of employers and management directly impacted on working lives. It is suggested that, in order to fully understand the men's fight for steelmaking, we must explore managerial activity and prerogative. The experiences of local steelmen are, therefore, situated in the background of the various personnel, commercial and development policies adopted by successive BSC

regimes. At the centre of this appraisal is a modernisation programme espousing an inflexible 'bigger is better' approach to industrial renewal. The thesis critically evaluates a flawed strategy that, in the case of Bilston, wantonly rundown and eventually sacrificed a consistently profitable facility. It is revealed how a process of managed decline was coordinated at plant-level, with management decision-making negatively impacting on workplace practices and, crucially, profitability.

Coordinating this process were divisional officials, who exploited management prerogative to introduce a series of discriminatory policies designed to shield production units already incorporated into their headquarters' long-term development proposals. After forcibly engineering a lossmaking situation at Bilston, an explicitly biased management oversaw a more formal rundown process. The thesis establishes how industry officials coordinated a campaign of misinformation that, in a successful attempt to legitimise the expedited closure of traditional plants, blamed their own many failings on employees. Foiled in their attempts to shut Bilston by conventional means, a cynical senior management team oversaw an insidious shop-floor assault designed to undermine rank and file resistance. The impact this and other questionable tactics had on the mindset of steelworkers underpins the penultimate sections of the thesis.

As a study into public sector steelmen, a further line of enquiry is to investigate the wider political environment and how the state impacted on the experiences of rank and file workers. Having survived a doctrinaire assault on the industry coordinated by the 1970/74 Edward Heath Government, Bilston's steelmen skilfully persuaded the re-elected Harold Wilson Government to absorb their plant into the industry's medium-term operating plan. It is argued, however, that Labour's steel policy was little more

than a political compromise which handed only a temporary stay of execution to Black Country steelworkers. Although the appointment of James Callaghan as Prime Minister in April 1976 brought an ideological recommitment to traditional steelmaking communities, a severe drop in world demand prompted a shift in the political landscape.

The thesis examines how a March 1978 White Paper saw the withdrawal of Labour's erstwhile manifesto pledge. The Bilston men, who had previously relied on their ability to manipulate sympathetic Whitehall officials, forlornly sought to exploit a loophole in Government policy. However, not only did the new industrial strategy permanently end any prospect of Bilston receiving vital investment, it also permitted the use of tempting state-sponsored compensation packages to induce local workers to surrender their livelihoods. Substantive elements of this study, therefore, define how the industrial policies of successive Governments not only drove the BJUAC's overall strategic framework, but ultimately contributed to the plant's demise.

The influence of state policy on Bilston's post-industrial social, political and economic environs is also examined. It is asserted that the domestic policies pursued by the Conservative Government, elected only weeks after the permanent cessation of iron and steelmaking in April 1979, prompted the BJUAC's decision to reform as a workers' cooperative. Moreover, the thesis demonstrates how Thatcherism not only determined the nature of their unique brand of community activism, but also their continued participation in social and political protest.

The response of the steel unions to the threat of industrial decline is another key aspect of the research, with the thesis measuring patterns of resistance and accommodation at executive level and, how these impacted on the fortunes of rank and file members. Offering a broader narrative of late twentieth century trade unionism, it presents a study into institutional conduct in a period of industrial decline. It is argued that, when confronted with recessionary and structural de-manning, the unions were regularly found wanting. The thesis establishes how inter-organisational disputes, resulting from a disorderly and fragmented institutional landscape, prohibited effective collective resistance from the TUCSICC, an official umbrella body consisting of the industry's major workers organisations.⁵ It is revealed how the steel unions, led by the moderate ISTC, too readily accepted the rationale behind management's 'bigger is better' philosophy, thereby sacrificing thousands of members on the altar of technological advancement. In a failed bid to pacify the concerns of fraternal brothers employed at doomed facilities, the unions adopted a 'no redundancies before re-employment' posture. The adequacy of this compromise plan is scrutinised, with the thesis uncovering how ideologically conservative organisations, acquiescing to managerial privilege over commercial and development policymaking, undermined the prospects of their rank and file members.

The thesis also examines how those policies pursued by steel union hierarchies at the centre shaped the strategies adopted by campaigning members at plant-level. The BJUAC's founding fathers, frustrated by the perceived ambivalence of their leaders, at first turned their backs on union headquarters. This position would change later in

⁵ The TUCSICC, formed immediately after nationalisation, consisted of ISTC, NUB, TGWU, GMWU, UCATT and the NCCC; an organisation representing fourteen different craft unions.

the campaign, particularly after the appointment of a seemingly more combative General Secretary. It is determined that despite his arrival at first appearing to herald a newfound organisational resilience, a policy vacuum promptly reappeared at executive level. Bereft of ideas, the steel unions again accepted management prerogative over policymaking by signing a productivity deal that legitimised the inbuilt overmanning myth propagated by BSC headquarters. Moreover, by acknowledging the need for structural streamlining measures whilst encouraging record breaking redundancy cheques in exchange for members' jobs, the steel unions merely opened the door to the aforementioned wave of closures. As the battle for Bilston reached its climax, their leaders' haphazard, firefighting approach to defending individual plants completely undermined the defence campaign. Ignoring these institutional shortcomings, the BJUAC, chaired and co-chaired by fraternal loyalists, continued to pin their colours to the union mast. This, the thesis asserts, would be to their own disadvantage.

In summary, this thesis recounts a little-known campaign to save a Black Country iron and steel plant from the standpoint of its rank and file steelmen. Focusing on their personal experiences during a decade-long economic crisis, it represents a vital contribution to research into the post-war history of workers and the workplace. The study, nevertheless, places the battle for Bilston in the industrial, political, economic and labour relations contexts of 1970s Britain; providing a detailed investigation into how the actions of the state, management and the labour movement directly impacted the prospects of ordinary workers.

Methodology

This analysis of the battle for Bilston works makes use of a rich body of pre-existing, yet largely unexplored documentary evidence. The survey of institutional behaviour benefits from collections housed at established archives. In the case of BSC, WCA's 'Bilston Steel works Collection' contains all administrative, financial and technical records for Bilston, permitting a close study of workplace practices, performance and management prerogative.⁶ Additional primary source material relating to the conduct of steel union bureaucrats has been consulted at Warwick University's MRC. The facility's authorised ISTC collection includes monthly editions of the steel union's journals, *Man and Metal* and *The Banner*; transcribed minutes of Executive meetings; quarterly reports; correspondence produced by full-time officials and transcriptions of all national resolutions passed by its leadership.⁷ Likewise, the Centre's TUC collection contains detailed reports and minute books for the Steel Committee, which are supplemented with a voluminous assortment of ancillary statements produced by trade union, Government and industry officials.⁸ These collections shed light on state

⁶ See 'Bilston Steelworks collection (1693 – c.1990s), WCA, DB-31'.

⁷ The 'ISTC, the BISAKTA and predecessors collection (1865-2004), MRC, MSS.36', sheds light on the union's official response to the changing economic and political landscape, and proposals for developing and rationalising the industry. The collection includes microfilm copies of all correspondence passed between individual works branches and union headquarters. These items help extend our awareness of the relationship that developed between the Confederation leadership and its lay members. Meanwhile, the 'SIMA collection, MRC, 755/4/4/4-5' reveals the activities the management union undertook on behalf of their Bilston members; and 'BSC and predecessor bodies, 1896 – 1981, MRC, MSS.365/BSC/56', includes material relating to management's systematic rundown of the works.

⁸ See 'Steel: Trade Union Consultative Committee, 1967-1975, MRC.292D/611.41/6 – 36'; and 'Steel Committee: Signed Minutes, 1972-1990, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/6 – 27'. The MRC's TUCSICC collection lays bare the collective actions of the steel unions during the crisis, granting the reader a

and organisational responses to the constantly changing economic, political, and industrial landscapes of 1970s Britain. Not only do they widen our understanding of the relationship the various steel union Executive Councils developed with rank and file members, but also each other – two key lines of enquiry within this study.

Notwithstanding their value in scrutinising institutional behaviour, the various WCA and MRC collections reveal very little about rank and file behaviour.⁹ In order to establish an alternative perspective, the thesis exploits extra-institutional primary source material previously housed in personal collections. Beginning in 2014, the author delivered an 18-month HLF sponsored community project surveying the industrial heritage of the works. The initiative led to the creation of the 'ITSOE collection', an incredibly diverse archive comprising of newspaper cuttings, personal correspondence, diaries, flyers and minute books for Bilston's Works Council and union branches. One particularly valuable cache of files includes reports and official communiqués sent between Bilston's protesting steelmen and local and central Government, industry and trade union officials.¹⁰ Not only does the ITSOE collection help expand our understanding of everyday life on the shop-floor, it also shines a spotlight on the overall strategic framework adopted by local shop stewards in their fight for jobs.

wider understanding of the body's inner dynamics and how internal conflict often prohibited any kind of effective collective response to structural de-manning.

⁹ Although a small folder of WCA files does relate to the local defence campaign, it only provides a partial picture of the activities of steelworkers at plant-level. See 'The Closure of British Steel at Bilston 1972-1979, WCA, DW-173'.

¹⁰ See 'ITSOE Collection, BCA1/1 – 1/6'.

Whereas the ITSOE documentary collection provides a much-needed antidote to the one-dimensional, top down interpretation offered by traditional collections, it amounts to only a partial record of local activities.¹¹ In an attempt to fill the empirical void, this thesis makes use of interview material collected from a group of ex-steelworkers by trained ITSOE volunteers.¹²

Infamously maligned by A.J.P. Taylor as “old men drooling about their youth”, the credibility of oral history was questioned by scholars contesting its legitimacy as an academic data collection tool.¹³ This would all change in the 1970s and 1980s when, in the words of Michael Frisch, the method was embraced by historians seeking to produce, “a new kind of history from bottom up and the outside in to challenge the established organisation of knowledge and power”.¹⁴ For some, oral history is employed as part of a reconstructive agenda, which Ron Grele describes as, “the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purpose of

¹¹ As an informal, un-constituted voluntary organisation spearheaded by fulltime workers, the BJUAC failed to keep a complete record of their activities.

¹² A small cohort of volunteers, many of whom had ancestral ties to the plant, received intensive interview training from the Oral History Society. Following an extensive outreach and screening process, they interviewed approximately twenty former steelworkers whom had either participated in or witnessed key events covered by this thesis. These men and women were loosely divided into four subgroups: 1) the sole surviving action committee leader; 2) ex-senior shop stewards who acted as a secondary support network for the action committee; 3) active rank and file trade union branch and Works Council members and 4) members of the wider community including political activists, community leaders and the wives of ex-steelmen. See ITSOE collection, BCA1/0. The thesis also benefits from the Documenting the Workshop of the World oral history project, which included interviews with action committee Chairman Dennis Turner and former works convenors. See Documenting the Workshop of the World, WCA, LS/LB6/2.

¹³ R. Gildea, ‘The Long March of Oral History: Around 1968 in France’, *Oral History*, 38 (2010), p. 68.

¹⁴ M. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, (New York: 1989), p. xviii.

historical reconstruction”.¹⁵ In the case of *In the Shadow of Elisabeth*, the ITSOE interview material has been deployed in what Lynn Abrams has labelled the “evidential model of usage”, encompassing, “the application of oral history for evidence gathering, the use of oral testimony as data, providing information to support an argument and illustrative material”.¹⁶ Any concerns over the validity of the interview material were – in part – assuaged by the use of reminiscence sessions. Adopting a roundtable approach, these private events provided an opportunity to authenticate and corroborate personal testimonies, and to capture memory narratives and personal reflections in a group setting. Meanwhile, the author of this thesis, in his capacity as a community historian, spent countless man-hours in the former works social centre speaking to ex-steelmen in an informal capacity. The results of these conversations, alongside the oral history interviews, underpin key sections of the research.

Notwithstanding the capacity of these techniques to verify the material collected at the interview stage, there is evidence that ITSOE’s oral testimonies, as personal recollections, contain what Anna Bryson and Sean McConville refer to as “false memories”.¹⁷ Indeed, the issue of subjectivity has long been debated by oral historians who, as part of their practice, have deliberately embraced the fallibility of interview data:

¹⁵ For a summary of the use of interviews for the purposes of historical reconstruction, see R. Grele, ‘Directions for Oral History in the United States’, in D.K. Dunaway and W.K. Baum (eds), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Plymouth, 1996), pp. 62-84.

¹⁶ L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, (London, 2010), p. 15.

¹⁷ A. Bryson and S. McConville, *The Routledge Guide to Interviewing: Oral History, Social Enquiry and Investigation*, (London, 2014).

Subjectivity then, at least in this sense, is not unique to oral history, but subjectivity – defined as the quality of defining or interpreting something through the medium of one’s mind – is what oral history is ... accessing it, even celebrating it – is the bread and butter of oral history.¹⁸

This thesis fully acknowledges the mismemories and distortions that may appear in the interview data; accepting that, in the words of Alessandro Portelli, “subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible ‘facts’”.¹⁹

The ITSOE collection, when combined with those items sourced from formal settings, has facilitated a comprehensive analysis that places Bilston’s rank and file experience in the wider institutional context. The thesis adopts a traditional linear chronological narrative, permitting a progressive and methodological analytical framework that traces the pattern of events as and when they occurred. Pragmatic and empirical, rather than abstract and overly theoretical, it provides an intimate, blow-by-blow account of both national and local events.

Structure

The first chapter presents a critical reading of the historiography of steel and the Black Country. Part one examines the development of labour history from the early institution studies through to the more analytical and reflective historiography of the

¹⁸ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 22.

¹⁹ A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, (New York, 1991), p. 50.

1960s and 1970s pioneered by scholars such as Thompson and Hobsbawm. It then highlights the limited place that steel holds in the landscape of both 'traditional' and 'new' labour history. The final part explores the problems with the existing historiography of the Black Country and the ways in which the study of work, and steel in particular, has been relatively neglected.

Divided into two distinct parts, chapter two places the public sector steel industry and the ensuing fight to save Bilston in historical context. The scope is deliberately broad, with the first half providing a general account of the industrial and commercial heritage of the trade prior to nationalisation in July 1967. By concentrating on the overall performance of Bilston works under two dynamic family firms, it offers an insight into how the facility survived the collapse of the pig iron trade in the late nineteenth century before becoming one of the most successful special steel plants of its kind. The chapter assesses how the basis of Bilston's business model was the advanced technical expertise, commercial nous and frugality of a class of steelworker who, decades later, would repeatedly post a profit even during the world crisis of the mid-1970s. It also exposes how an ill-fated capital intensive post-war reconstruction programme would sow the seeds of its demise under the Corporation. By surveying the nascent trade union landscape of the industry, the chapter sheds light on the origins, ideological underpinnings, structure and internal dynamics of the ISTC. A key area of interest here is the union's traditional readiness to sacrifice large swathes of members in the name of modernisation. Another theme explored is the historically fractured relationship the ISTC developed with rival unions; an issue that generated a fragmented labour relations climate which also prevailed into nationalisation. The remainder of the chapter focuses exclusively on the unique industrial relations of the

Black Country works. It is contended that, by adopting a uniquely progressive approach to management, the plant's paternalistic owners established an *esprit de corps* with a wider workforce that habitually displayed an aversion to combination, self-organisation and radical industrial action. Meanwhile, outside the works, local shop stewards played an active role in political and community life. These longstanding traditions, later chapters reveal, had an explicit impact on the strategic framework adopted by subsequent generations of workers during the battle for Bilston works.²⁰

Chapter three documents the fortunes of local workers during the early years of state ownership. Nationalisation originally generated a new sense of hope as steelworkers were buoyed by a wide range of progressive personnel policies introduced by enlightened Corporation officials and a supportive Labour Government. Attention is drawn to how these social functions were extended to its fledgling rationalisation programme by establishing safeguards that initially cushioned the effect of restructuring. Although some minor closures did occur in this early period, they were carried out at a measured pace and with the full compliance of affected workers. The chapter provides an insight into how this relatively peaceful coexistence would end when, from April 1971 onwards, the Conservative Government exploited a downturn in the traditional trade cycle to unilaterally expedite closures. It investigates the main political events surrounding Edward Heath's dogmatic approach to state steel and how it influenced the trajectory of the February 1973 Ten Year Strategy White Paper, which set out BSC's long-term development plans. The chapter dissects a 'bigger is better'

²⁰ Against a backdrop of low union consciousness amongst the wider workforce, Bilston's senior shop stewards traditionally participated in the civic life of the town. This, the thesis will demonstrate, had a significant impact on the strategic direction of the campaign.

approach to modernisation that was both ill-conceived and badly delivered. One of the core findings of this critical appraisal is that management left the industry ill-prepared for the coming crisis by overlooking the commercial benefits of flexible mini-works such as Bilston. Presenting an overview of the actions of the first generation of so-called WACs or action committees, the chapter concludes with a detailed investigation into the earliest instances of industrial resistance at Bilston. Whilst identifying the origins of the BJUAC, a primary objective here is to establish its initial tactical approach. Providing an account of local events, the chapter establishes how shop stewards, frustrated by the apathy displayed amongst their national leaders, adopted a strategic framework that centred on recruiting a regional political lobby to successfully petition decisionmakers on their behalf.

Chapter four examines the manner in which Bilston's steelmen reacted to the arrival of the slump at the midway point of the decade. It begins with an evaluation of the Labour Government's interventionist approach to steel by reviewing the impact of a 1975 state-sponsored tripartite review of management's closure programme. It is argued that the inquiry failed to address the fundamental flaws of the Ten Year Strategy. As a relieved workforce celebrated a political pardon secured with the assistance of their lobby, they were suddenly hit by the crisis. The chapter suggests BSC, now led by a more combative top brass, looked to unilaterally expedite mass redundancies previously postponed by the Government review. The adequacy of the trade union response to this move is scrutinised, with the TUCSICC temporarily blocking BSC's advances by negotiating a national cost-cutting deal. The chapter chronicles how Bilston's dutiful labour force reacted to the changing economic landscape of the mid-1970s, establishing the methods in which they adapted working

practices to maintain their proud tradition of profitability. A short-lived mini-boom was bolstered by the early industrial strategies of new Prime Minister James Callaghan, persuading management to enthusiastically extend Bilston's life expectancy by half a decade. The chapter, however, demonstrates how the plant's performance continued to be diluted by failings elsewhere, prompting senior industry officials to cynically falsify labour costs and productivity statistics in a bid to force through the rundown of older facilities. Placed under immense pressure, steel union leaders signed a deal which – in acknowledging the existence of overmanning – facilitated the transfer of orders from traditional sites to more modern, loss-making facilities safeguarded under the Ten Year Strategy. The chapter concludes by detailing events surrounding the subsequent cessation of ironmaking at Bilston which, it is alleged, management secured by abusing existing consultation machinery.

Chapter five is principally concerned with responses to a March 1978 decision by the Labour Government to partially disengage from state steel. Having witnessed their prized blast furnace mothballed, a revamped BJUAC acted on the advice of policymakers by revising their earlier approach. In a display of solidarity that was typical of a tightknit group of industrial workers, they worked alongside local middle-management to produce a sophisticated report advocating redevelopment on commercial grounds. The chapter explores how the situation on the ground was quickly overtaken by wider political events at the centre. A beleaguered Labour Government, deceived by BSC's vague and perfidious overcapacity/overmanning narrative, made an epoch-making decision to abandon its pre-election pledge to safeguard older steelmaking communities. With Whitehall officials retreating into the shadows, emboldened management expedited the closure of previously pardoned

sites before turning their attentions towards the Black Country. The men's tactical flexibility is highlighted, with the BJUAC realigning their thinking by seeking to establish a closer working relationship with their unions. Following an examination of the inner dynamics of the action committee's streamlined new leadership team, the chapter considers how shop stewards pursued their leaders and galvanised an increasingly disenfranchised shop-floor.

Chapter six begins with an appraisal of the trade union landscape in the wake of a national strike threat made on behalf of Bilston. With the men's actions forcing management into a temporary retreat, the TUCSICC was handed one final opportunity to formulate a collective anti-closure campaign from the centre. The chapter exposes how inter-organisational conflict at executive level resulted in yet another policy vacuum. As their leaders wavered, Bilston's enterprising shop stewards sought to take matters into their own hands. The men's relationship with their union leaders in London is examined, with the chapter highlighting how the latter finally threw their hat into the ring after a further round of lobbying from the Bilston men. The chapter concludes by outlining the management's stubborn refusal to answer further calls for investment.

Chapter seven provides a comprehensive account of what would be a turbulent final phase of the fight to save Bilston's heavy-end.²¹ It begins by exploring how management, having been frustrated in their efforts to negotiate closure by legitimate

²¹ The heavy-end of a fully-integrated steelworks consists of a blast furnace for producing iron, and a melting shop for steel. A rolling mill and finishing end subsequently transform crude steel into a variety of semi-finished or finished products.

means, deliberately sought to weaken local resistance. Adopting a range of unscrupulous tactics, the primary objective was to offer lucrative compensation packages in an attempt to encourage voluntary mass redundancies. The methods adopted to counter these illicit overtures are assessed, with a seemingly more militant BJUAC overseeing a historic plant takeover and work-in that secured another stay of execution. But with the Corporation determined to have their way, it is revealed how the campaign became badly exposed. With no one left to turn to, Bilston's desperate shop stewards made one final approach to an ISTC leadership who belatedly launched a three-pronged defence of their fraternal brothers in the Black Country. The effectiveness of this final flurry of activity is measured, as is the mindset of a battle-weary workforce. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the ideologically conservative steel unions' refusal to call a national stoppage led to an irrevocable malaise taking hold of the shop-floor. With the men dividing into two opposing camps, it is demonstrated how the campaign would eventually disintegrate from within.

Chapter eight begins by highlighting the treatment of the nation's public sector steelworkers at the hands of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government. Part one concerns itself with the 1980 steel strike, a tumultuous event that is placed in the context of both past and present rationalisation measures. The post-strike climate is explored, with yet another new industry chief announcing his arrival by launching further job cuts. The chapter draws attention to trade union responses to an unprecedented threat to commercial steelmaking, highlighting the positive effect the stoppage had on a TUCSICC leadership that finally relinquished longstanding rivalries to launch a sophisticated pan-organisation executive campaign. Politicised by the 92-day strike, which they organised at regional level, the BJUAC briefly reformed in a vain

attempt to defend what remained of their facility. Although shop stewards prepared a radical new defence strategy, their colleagues were unwilling to participate in yet another protracted struggle. The second half of the chapter is devoted to surveying life in post-industrial Bilston. Identifying the reasons for the failed economic regeneration of the town, it recognises the role the BJUAC played in attending the needs of a community struggling with the harsh realities of de-industrialisation. By forming a welfare cooperative on abandoned works property, the men established a forum from which they delivered a range of frontline services and innovative re-training schemes to unemployed industrial workers. The chapter concludes by demonstrating how these experiences enhanced a collective social and political consciousness already heightened by the campaign and the aforementioned steel strike. Having spearheaded a region-wide protest movement, Dennis Turner entered Parliament where he devoted his twenty-five-year political career to championing the cause of traditional working-class communities.

The conclusion summarises the role the principal actors played in the battle for Bilston iron and steelworks. After critically assessing the actions of successive Governments, senior industry officials and trade union leaders, it appraises the behaviour of the BJUAC leadership throughout the battle for Bilston. Some of the more controversial elements of the campaign are addressed, particularly retrospective complaints levelled at action committee leader Dennis Turner. Did he overly rely on political and trade union elites to save the plant? As an institutional loyalist, did he allow his esteem for his union leadership cloud his judgement? Did he cynically exploit the anti-closure campaign to enhance his own political career? Were charges of autocratic behaviour at all reasonable? The thesis concludes by examining the legacy of Turner and his

colleagues, taking a brief look at how they continue to influence the social and political landscapes of Bilston today.

Chapter 1: Steel and history: a critical review of the literature

Labour History

The early pioneers of labour history, adopting a strict institutional approach, focused their attentions on documenting the activities of formal organisations such as political parties, trade unions and employers' associations. The likes of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Barbara Hammond and G.D.H. Cole placed trade union bureaucrats and national political leaders at the very centre of their protracted accounts.¹ Although working men and their communities occasionally featured in their voluminous texts, they were invariably depicted as the malleable playthings of a powerful capitalist or managerial elite. Following WWII, practitioners continued to advocate these so-called Webbian histories, limiting labour history to the study of organisations and their bureaucratic officials:²

¹ See G.D.H. Cole, *An Introduction to Trade Unionism* (London, 1918) and *A Short History of the British Working Class Movement 1789-1947* (London, 1948); B.L. Hammond, *The Town Labourer 1760-1832: The New Civilisation* (London, 1917); and S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, revised ed. (London, 1926).

² For examples of general trade union or labour movement histories published in the immediate post-war era, see H.A. Clegg, A. Fox and A.F. Thompson, *History of British Trade Unions since 1889: 1889-1910* (Oxford, 1964); A. Flanders, *Trade Unions* (London, 1952); A. Hutt, *British Trade Unionism: An Outline History*, revised ed. (London, 1975); L. Morton and G. Tate, *The British Labour Movement, 1770-1920*, revised ed. (London, 1956); and H. Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (London, 1963). Single or comparative institutional histories also continued to flourish in this period. There are too many to list in this short review, but some more noteworthy examples include H.A. Clegg, *General Union: A Study of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers* (Oxford, 1954); A.I. Marsh, *Industrial Relations in Engineering* (Oxford, 1965); A. Spoor, *White-Collar Union: Sixty Years of NALGO* (London, 1967); and H.A. Turner, *Trade Union Growth, Structure and Policy: A Comparative Study of the Cotton Unions* (London, 1962). For a review of trade union historiography during the period in question, see E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Trade Union Historiography', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History (BSSLH)* 8 (Spring 1964), pp. 31-36.

They were studying the organised workers' movement, its leaders, actions and ideas. They knew which research methods they were supposed to use and had little doubt about the appropriate framework for interpretation. True, dominant approaches varied from one country to the next, but almost everyone seemed to have his or her own 'synthesis'. They all had one thing in common: they focused on the institutional aspects of labour history, such as organisational structure, congresses, leaders, debates, strikes and elections.³

John Harrison, in his review of the Asa Briggs and John Saville edited *Essays in Labour History*, bemoaned the antiquated nature of this traditional approach, declaring:

But the central question with which one is left after reading the *Essays* is, what is Labour History all about?; or, more precisely, what should be the methods and content of this field of study? ... The weakness of much Labour History is that it has not yet emancipated itself from approaches and methods derived from economic history and biography ...⁴

Answering this critique was E.P. Thompson who, by publishing his momentous *The Making of the Working Class*, sought to, "rescue the poor stockinger, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna

³ M. van der Linden, *Transnational Labour History* (Aldershot, 2003), p. 1.

⁴ J.F.C. Harrison, Reviews: Asa Briggs and John Saville, *New Left Review* (NLR), 3 (1960).

Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity”.⁵ Similarly, in a deliberately provocative journal article reviewing the state of the literature, Eric Hobsbawm criticised labour history for its banality:

A few works of scholarship, like R.W. Postgate’s *Builders’ History* (1929) and the 1934 TUC *Martyrs of Tolpuddle* stand out among a mass of jubilee or souvenir volumes or pamphlets, mainly written by elderly officials or sympathetic publicists with a very much greater sense of union piety and retrospective self-satisfaction than scholarly competence or critical sense.⁶

When advocating the abandonment of the existing status quo, these radical thinkers actively encouraged the adoption of a social approach to the study of labour history in order to record the lives and experiences of ordinary working-class communities. Assuming the moniker of ‘new history’, this burgeoning school championed a move away from formal institutions and their national leaderships, promoting innovative investigations into what Thompson had labelled “history from below”.⁷ To some disciples, these calls to arms sparked an interest in life away from the shop-floor, whilst others cast their scholarly gaze towards documenting everyday experiences within the workplace.⁸ A member of the latter camp, James Cronin – author of *Industrial Conflict*

⁵ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), p. 12.

⁶ Hobsbawm, *Trade Union Historiography*, p. 31.

⁷ E.P. Thompson, ‘History from Below’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966.

⁸ Those who sought to investigate everyday experiences away from the workplace busied themselves documenting various aspects of working-class culture, family and domestic life, housing and leisure time, social mobility, race and gender. Others, retaining an explicit interest in workers, investigated forms of industrial and collective action away from trade union headquarters. The vast majority had a specific interest on more militant breeds of workers engaging in radical acts such as protests, riots and unauthorised strikes.

in Great Britain – summarised the contribution this new generation of writers had made to a field that had become frustratingly prosaic:

Yet another important cluster of researchers felt that, despite the orientation of previous labor history towards workers' economic interests and collective organization, very little was in fact known about workers' lives at work ... I would suggest that in broad terms it would be agreed that 'rank and filists' have enormously enriched our understanding of the daily life of workers, of the problems they face in the labour market and at work, of the strategies and attitudes of employers, and of the opportunities different working environments and economic conjunctures have presented for organization and collective action.⁹

Cronin and his contemporaries, many of whom were disciples of the 'New Left', looked to record working-class experiences by surveying radical acts of resistance, or what Allan Flanders termed the "challenge from below".¹⁰ This new framework, however, proved highly controversial, with those exponents studying trade union activity in the workplace instinctively drawn to more militant breeds of industrial workers. A definitive pattern emerged, with researchers instinctively and brazenly attacking trade union leaders for their perceived conservatism which, it was asserted, subverted their rank and file members. Cronin pinpointed its core assumptions:

⁹ J.E. Cronin, 'The Rank and File and the Social History of the Working Class', *International Review of Social History (IRSH)*, 34.1 (1989), pp. 85-86.

¹⁰ A.D. Flanders, *Management and Unions: Theory and reform of industrial relations*, (London, 1970).

The [first] assumption [is] that unions have an interest in, and a propensity toward, accommodation with management whereas ordinary workers do not. Unions are thus seen as institutions that constrain workers' inherent militancy and that help tie them to capitalism. The second assumption underlying 'rank and filism' is that the working class is 'endowed with a vast reservoir of latent power which is contained by the institutions which represent them'.¹¹

An inevitable scholarly row ensued.¹² Alistair Reid, himself an advocate of old-school institutionalism, was concerned by the predilection of some labour historians to unjustly attack the trade union elite. In one essay, he targeted his counterparts for unfairly discrediting moderate leaders.¹³ Jonathan Zeitlin went a step further, calling for rank and filism to be "abandoned outright".¹⁴ In one controversial critique, he argued that, by discarding the traditional framework, his rivals had overemphasised the informal actions of the ordinary worker, advocating a renewed interest in the work of national union officials. In his much-debated article, *From Labour History to the*

¹¹ Cronin, *The Rank and File*, p. 81.

¹² Despite being maligned by their critics, advocates of institutional approach to labour history continued to publish in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty first centuries. A. Hutt produced his *British Trade Unionism: A Short History* (London, 1975), whilst H. Pelling penned a fifth edition of his standard text, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (London, 1992). These two stalwarts were joined by a younger generation of labour historians. Some of the more noteworthy examples include W.H. Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism, 1700-1998* (London, 1999); and K. Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism, 1770-1990* (Stroud, 1992). Meanwhile, union specific histories also flourished. See V. Bailey, *Forged in Fire: The History of the Fire Brigades Union* (London, 1992); M. Carpenter, *Working for Health: The History of the Confederation of Health Service Employees* (London, 1988); and B. Wynn, *Skilled at All Trades: The History of the Farmworkers' Union, 1947-1984* (London, 1993).

¹³ A. Reid, 'Marxism and Revisionism in British Labour History', *BSSLH*, 52.3 (1987), p. 46.

¹⁴ J. Zeitlin, 'Rank and Filism in British Labour History: A Critique', *International Review of Social History*, 34.1 (April 1989), p. 60.

History of Industrial Relations, Zeitlin proceeded to advance an alternative mode of study:

Taking stock of recent research on late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, it argues that relationships between workers and employers at the workplace were shaped less by informal groups or spontaneous social and economic processes than by institutional forces: by organisations such as trade unions, shop stewards' committees, business enterprises, employers' associations and the state; and by the rules and procedures governing their interaction, such as collective agreements, conciliation and arbitration boards, wages councils and legislation.¹⁵

Zeitlin had, quite rightly, drawn attention to the manner in which a new generation of scholars either diluted or completely overlooked the impact capital, trade unions and the state had had on the development of British industrial relations.

Reviewing the debate, John McIlroy highlighted the contradictory nature of the framework being advocated by this new generation of institutionalists:

If we leave things there, there is a risk of regressing to a simplistic, unitary model of trade unionism which eliminates, minimizes or overlooks, certainly fails to categorize, the internal differentiation and internal conflict that has

¹⁵ J. Zeitlin, 'From Labour History to the History of Industry Relations', *Economic History Review*, 40.2 (1987), pp. 159-160.

existed, analysis of which is necessary to a proper comprehension of collective organization.¹⁶

In what was another timely contribution, American sociologist, Howard Kimeldorf, called for a hybrid approach to the study of trade unionism:

If the old consensus is ever to be effectively challenged it will mean returning unions to the center of labor studies, not in some mechanical fashion that merely reproduces the former institutionalism, but rather by viewing the relationship between unions and their members through the experiential lens of the new history. The thought of analyzing unions from 'the ground up' will no doubt offend the sensibilities of many labor historians, making both 'hard line' institutionalists and 'new wave' culturalists more than a little uncomfortable. But there is no reason, apart from intellectual tradition, why the two approaches should not be brought together as part of a new synthesis that reintegrates the union, as a critical component of the proletarian experience, into workers' everyday lives.¹⁷

Kimeldorf's intervention was, however, seemingly ignored by British labour historians. As many distracted themselves with the study of clandestine acts of radicalism throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, there has remained a conspicuous

¹⁶ J. McIlroy, 'The Society for the Study of Labour History, 1956-1985: Its Origins and its Heyday', *Labour History Review (LHR)*, 75.1 (2010), p. 110.

¹⁷ H. Kimeldorf, 'Bringing the unions back in (or why we need a new old labour history)', *Labor History*, 32.1 (1991), p. 102.

neglect of the post-war activities of trade unionists. Concerned by this trend, John Saville lamented history from below for neglecting the modern era:

But it has to be noted that the majority of radically minded or Marxist historians who work in the modern period concentrate largely upon nineteenth century, working-class history, with a special convergence on the radicalism of the pre-1850 decades, and little upon the dominant themes of twentieth-century society ... it cannot but be remarked that some, at least, of this interest in the working-class past has a feeling of rather cosy antiquarianism about it.¹⁸

With labour historians distracted elsewhere, the contemporary period has been tackled by industrial relations experts and political scientists. However, despite constituting the “heartland for the study of trade unionism”, they have, according to McIlroy *et al.*, singularly failed to investigate crucial areas of interest:

It [industrial relations] has proved unable to come to terms with central questions: the role of the state; the political alignments of trade unions; power, conflict and change in the workplace; and the social processes of worker mobilisation.¹⁹

¹⁸ J. Saville, *The Labour Movement in Britain: a commentary* (London, 1988), pp. 137-138.

¹⁹ J. McIlroy, N. Fishman and A. Campbell (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The high tide of trade unionism, 1964-79*, (Aldershot, 1999), p. 3.

When reviewing the literature, it is apparent that both the activities of the steel unions and the experiences of their lay members have been generally ignored by domestic labour historians.

The Historiography of Steel

The study of iron and, latterly, steel instead became the domain of economic and business historians focusing on the growth, decline and adjustment of the trade between the Victorian and post-war eras.²⁰ Interest was driven by the everchanging political landscape, with the industry experiencing some form of state intervention from the Great Depression onwards. Further uncertainty over proprietorship, initially prompted by the first nationalisation in 1951, precipitated a multitude of regional, company-specific or plant histories, many of which were commissioned by the boards

²⁰ There is a huge reserve of work looking at the industrial, commercial and technical heritage of iron and steel; helping to widen our expanding of the trade's complex record of growth, decline and adjustment throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For general, industry-wide studies, see T.S. Ashton, *Iron and Steel in the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester, 1951); A. Birch, *The Economic History of the British Iron and Steel Industry, 1784-1879* (London, 1967); D. Burn, *The Economic History of Steelmaking, 1867-1939: A Study in Competition* (Cambridge, 1961); J.C. Carr and W. Taplin, *A History of the British Steel Industry* (Cambridge, 1962); D.N. McCloskey, *Economic Maturity and Entrepreneurial Decline: British Iron and Steel, 1870-1913* (Cambridge, 1973); S. Tolliday, *Business, Banking, and politics: The Case of British Steel, 1918-1939* (Cambridge, 1987); and J. Vaizey, *The History of British Steel* (London, 1974). The final four chapters of Vaizey's *tour de force* provides a detailed overview of the trade's troubled post-war history, as does B.S. Keeling and A.E.G. Wright's, *The Development of the Modern British Steel Industry* (London, 1964). However, as works that were sponsored by industry officials, they both adopt a largely favourable view of the steel firms. For a more critical appraisal, see D. Burn, *The Steel Industry, 1939-1959: A Study on Competition and Planning* (Cambridge, 1961) and D.W. Heal, *The Steel Industry in Post-war Britain* (London, 1974).

of steel firms themselves.²¹ The continuous ideological struggle for steel between 1951 and 1967 provoked additional interest from economists, political scientists and experts in the field of public policy and planning.²² Investigating the relative merits of state versus private ownership, these scholars involved themselves in a national

²¹ For company specific studies, see P. Payne, *Colvilles and the Scottish Steel Industry* (Oxford, 1979); A. Reid (1948) *Continuous Venture* (Shotton, 1948); G.R. Walshaw and C.A.J. Behrendt, *The History of Appleby-Frodingham* (Lincolnshire, 1950); and W.G. Willis, *South Durham Steel and Iron Co. Ltd* (London, 1969). There are several regional studies, the vast majority of which tend to focus on the larger steel producing areas. A survey of the historiography reveals some interest in the rise and fall of the Black Country's pig iron industry. For a general overview of the trade's origins, structure, technical and commercial development, and fall of the nineteenth century trade, see G.C. Allen, *Industrial Development of Birmingham and the Black Country* (London, 1966); J. Baker, *History of the Nut and Bolt Industry in the West Midlands* (University of Birmingham MA dissertation, 1965); W.K.V. Gale, *The Black Country Iron Industry: A Technical History* (1979, London); G.R. Morton and M. Le Guillou, 'The Rise and Fall of the South Staffordshire Pig Iron Industry', *The British Foundryman* (July 1967); and R. Shill, *South Staffordshire Ironmasters* (Gloucestershire, 2008). Works on the area's steel industry are woefully short in number. In the case of Bilston, G.R. Morton and M. Le Guillou, 'Alfred Hickman Ltd, 1866-1932', *West Midlands Studies* 3 (1969), pp. 1-30; and M. Le Guillou, 'Developments in the South Staffordshire Iron and Steel Industry, 1850-1913, in the Light of Home and Foreign Competition' (University of Keele Ph.D. thesis, 1972) detail the transition from a crumbling industrial mausoleum to a state-of-the-art iron and steelmaking facility under Alfred Hickman. Although these two works touch on the industrialist's celebrated altruism, there is very little on the close working relationship he developed with his employees. Moreover, none of the aforementioned studies investigate the plant's industrial and commercial experience under Stewart and Lloyd's Ltd. Although F. Scopes, *The Development of Corby Works* (Portsmouth, 1968) does provide a brief pre-WWII commercial and technical history of Bilston, it completely ignores local industrial relations.

²² For an analysis of the impact of public ownership during the interwar years, see S. Tolliday, *Business, Banking, and Politics: The Case of British Steel, 1918-1939* (Cambridge, 1987). The internal and external debate surrounding the ill-fated first nationalisation is covered by a wide range of works including D. Edgerton, 'War, Reconstruction, and the Nationalization of Britain, 1939-1951', *Past & Present*, 210; W. Fienbergh and R. Eveley, *Steel is Power: The Case for Nationalisation* (London, 1948); D. McEachern, *A Class Against Itself: Power in the Nationalisation of the British Steel Industry* (Cambridge, 1980); and A.A. Rogow, *The Labour Government and British Industry, 1945-1951* (Oxford, 1955). Denationalisation is ably covered by K. Burk, *The First Privatisation: The Politicians, the City, and the Denationalisation of Steel* (London, 1988), whilst the political debate surrounding renationalisation is explored by H. Abromeit, *British Steel: An Industry between the State and the Private Sector* (Leamington Spa, 1986); and R. Kelf-Cohen, *British Nationalisation 1945-1973* (London, 1973).

conversation over commercial operations, labour productivity, development and the spatial arrangement of an industry that was in constant turmoil.²³

The labour historiography of the post-war steel, on the other hand, is meagre, with scholars instead turning their attentions to the origins of the iron and steel unions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Existing literature tends to focus on the sometimes chaotic journey from sectional, regionally based organisations into collectivist industrial unions.²⁴ Adopting a primarily conventional, top down approach, labour historians have depicted how, after prolonged and damaging bouts of industrial disorder in the second half of the nineteenth century, trade union leaders and employers successfully nullified rank and file discord *vis-à-vis* formal negotiation and

²³ The overall commercial and financial performance of BSC, particularly during the world steel crisis, is tackled by a number of economic historians or specialists in accountancy and business studies. For highly critical appraisals of management performance, see R.A. Bryer, T.J. Brignall and A.R. Maunders, *Accounting for British Steel: A Financial Analysis of the Failure of the British Steel Corporation, and Who was to Blame* (Aldershot, 1982); E. Cottrell, *The Giant with Feet of Clay: the British Steel Industry, 1945-1981* (Cambridge, 1981); R. Pryke, *Public Enterprise in Practice: The British Experience of Nationalisation over Two Decades* (London, 1971); and M. Upham, 'British Steel: Retrospect and Prospect', *Industrial Relations Journal (IRJ)* 11.3 (1980), pp. 5-21. Another well-furnished area of study is that of Government economic policy and industrial strategy, with political scientists devoting a great deal of attention to the design and implementation of the failed Ten Year Strategy in particular. See K. Ovenden, *The Politics of Steel* (London, 1978); J. Redwood, *Public Enterprise in Crisis: The Future of Nationalised Industries* (London, 1980); A. Silbertson, 'Nationalised Industries: Government Intervention and Industrial Efficiency', in Butler and Halsey (eds), *Policy and Politics, Essays in honour of Norman Chester* (London, 1978), pp. 140-151; and S. Young, *Intervention in the Mixed Economy: The Evolution of British Industrial Policy 1964-72* (London, 1974). In focusing on the actions of Government officials and industry planners, none of these studies investigate the local impact these policy decisions had on individual works and their employees.

²⁴ Much of this work focuses on combinations in North England, where workers displayed a propensity towards formal organisation. See N.P. Howard, 'The Strikes and Lockouts in the Iron Industry and the Formation of the Ironworkers' Unions 1862-1869', *IRSH*, 18.3 (1973), pp. 396-427; and A. Pugh, *Men of Steel, by One of Them: A Chronicle of Eighty-eight Years of Trade Unionism* (London, 1951).

conciliation apparatus or wages boards.²⁵ Such a portrayal has, in turn, stifled wider academic interest. Notwithstanding scholarly works on the embryonic industrial relations history of steel, there is still a marked absence of studies exploring its post-WWI development.

With a discernible academic void, the only comprehensive accounts of trade union activity in the twentieth century were penned by national leaders themselves. This pattern of insider history first emerged when John Hodge, inaugural President of the ISTC, published his autobiography, *Workman's Cottage to Windsor Castle*, which included an account of the role he played in the professionalisation of the steel unions and his experiences as a Government Minister.²⁶ The floodgates were now firmly ajar, with former NUB leader Jack Owen providing his own history of combination amongst Britain's blast furnace workers in *Ironmen*.²⁷ The most detailed contribution to the early literature, however, was penned by the Confederation's first General Secretary, Arthur Pugh. Coinciding with the Clement Attlee Government's controversial decision to nationalise the industry, *Men of Steel, by One of Them* presents a complete record of collective action up to and including WWII.²⁸ Although the extensive text, like those of his peers, is an explicitly self-serving organisational and biographical account of the journey towards formalisation, it still provides a valuable insight into the political and

²⁵ The very first negotiation and arbitration apparatus in iron and steel was established in the Black Country. However, the Midland Iron and Steel Wages Board had a troubled pre-WWI history, with local iron and steelmen repeatedly turning their backs on labour leaders in order to make their own agreements with masters. For a history of the board, see E. Taylor, *The Better Temper: A Commemorative History of the Midland Iron and Steel Wages Board, 1876-1976* (London, 1976).

²⁶ J. Hodge, *Workman's Cottage to Windsor Castle* (London, 1931).

²⁷ J. Owen, *Ironmen: National Union of Blastfurnacemen, Ore Miners, Coke Workers and Kindred Trades, 1878-1935*, 2nd ed. (Middlesbrough, 1953).

²⁸ Pugh, *Men of Steel*.

ideological outlook of the modern day steel unions' founding fathers. The book also highlights a series of episodes whereby these traditionally authoritative institutions sided with management in disputes over pay, working conditions and even rationalisation. Pugh and his colleagues' pro-establishment agenda, crystallised during the interwar years, provides a valuable context to explaining the behaviour of their successors approximately half a century later.

A limited post-war labour historiography of steel continued to be dominated by institutional accounts penned by trade union bureaucrats. *Hard Labour*, for example, is the official autobiography of Bill Sirs who, as head of the ISTC and the TUCSICC during the world steel crisis, was an instrumental figure in driving trade union strategy throughout the period covered by this thesis.²⁹ A patently self-indulgent text that seeks to divert readers' attentions towards what the author deems to be the more successful chapters of his period in office, it often brushes over an unprecedented restructuring process that took place in the second half of the 1970s. When Sirs does, albeit briefly, discuss what ultimately prompted the closure stampede, he lambasts the use of mouth-watering redundancy cheques, conveniently disregarding his own role in encouraging management to adopt this cynical tool. Another reoccurring theme within *Hard Labour* is the problematic relationship ISTC bureaucrats developed with their fellow union leaders; an issue which, as this thesis repeatedly asserts, prevented any genuine attempt at organising a coordinated, pan-union defence strategy at executive level.

²⁹ B. Sirs, *Hard Labour* (London, 1985).

The same can also be said of the only other comprehensive account of trade union activity under state ownership, Martin Upham's *Tempered Not Quenched*.³⁰ As an authoritative, sanctioned history of the Confederation's post-war activity, the study looks to redirect responsibility for the failure to block plant closures on rival Executives. In doing so, Upham provides a valuable commentary on the inaction of the TUCSICC, an umbrella organisation that was often rendered impotent by prolonged bouts of infighting. Another key aspect of *Tempered* is its exploration into the cosy relationship which developed between the pro-establishment union and state officials: a factor that helped determine the fate of Bilston. However, as is the case with Sirs' contribution, this account consciously dilutes the role rank and file members played in defending their livelihoods. Although, Upham at least acknowledges the existence of the WACs, they are too often depicted as a superfluous subplot to the supposedly more vital struggle taking place at national level.

With the unions providing their own historical accounts, the story of steel and steelmen under state ownership has suffered the further indignity of being completely marginalised by contemporary labour historians who, in search of an authentic rank and file experience, have distracted themselves elsewhere. The new forms of workplace mobilisation throughout the 1970s have attracted some degree of academic interest. Earlier, more general accounts of worker co-operatives, plant takeovers and sit-ins by Ken Coates and John Greenwood have recently been supplemented with additions from Michael Gold and Dave Sherry.³¹ Meanwhile, the literature on specific,

³⁰ M. Upham, *Tempered Not Quenched: The History of the ISTC, 1951-1997* (London, 1997).

³¹ See K. Coates (ed.), *Essays on Industrial Democracy* (Nottingham, 1971); *The New Worker Co-Operatives* (London, 1976); and *Work-ins, Sit-ins and Industrial Democracy: The Implications of Factory Occupations in Great Britain in the Early 'Seventies* (Nottingham, 1981); M. Gold, 'Worker Mobilization

plant-level anti-closure campaigns was, for a long time at least, dominated by non-historical social scientists investigating the epoch-making Upper Clyde Shipbuilders occupation and work-in of 1971/2.³² Scotland is in fact well represented in the historiography of workplace protest, with a series of local case studies into campaigns established by rank and file employees at the Scottish Daily News, the Uddingston Caterpillar plant and Inverclyde's Lee Jeans factory.³³ Another region that has caught the imagination of scholars exploring workers' mobilisation is the North West, with studies on the Gardner Engines occupation in Manchester, as well as protests at Cammell Laird Shipbuilders, Fisher-Bendix and Kirkby Manufacturing in Merseyside.³⁴

With these and other industrial workers canonised in the literature, the humble steelman, known for his passivity and close ties to management and capital, has failed to capture the imagination of labour historians. Explaining the trend, Peter Bowen *et al.* concluded:

in the 1970s: Revisiting Work-ins, Co-operatives and Alternative Corporate Plans', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations (HSIR)*, 18.2 (2004), pp. 65-106; J. Greenwood, *Worker Sit-ins and Job Protection* (London, 1977); and D. Sherry, *Occupy! A Short History of Workers' Occupation* (London, 2010).

³² A. Buchan, *The Right to Work: The Story of the Upper Clyde Confrontation* (London, 1972); J. Foster and C. Woolfson, *The Politics of the UCS Work-in: Class Alliances and the Right to Work*, (London, 1986); J. McGill, *Crisis on the Clyde: The Story of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders* (London, 1973); and W. Thompson and F. Hart, *The UCS Work-In* (London, 1972).

³³ See A. Clark, 'And the next thing, the chairs barricaded the door ...': The Lee Jeans Factory Occupation, Trade Unionism and Gender in Scotland in the 1980s', *Scottish Labour History*, 48 (2013), pp. 116-135; R. McKay and B. Barr, *The Story of the Scottish Daily News* (London, 1976); and C. Woolfson and J. Foster, *Track Record: The Story of the Caterpillar Occupation* (London, 1988).

³⁴ See T. Clark, *Sit-in at Fisher-Bendix* (Nottingham, 1974); T. Eccles, *Under New Management: The Story of Britain's Largest Worker Co-Operative – Its Successes and Failures* (London, 1981); S. Mustchin, 'Conflict, Mobilization, and Deindustrialisation: The 1980 Gardner Strike and Occupation', *HSIR*, 37 (2016); and 'From Workplace Occupation to Mass Imprisonment: The 1984 Strike at Cammell Laird Shipbuilders', *HSIR*, 31-32 (2011), pp. 31-66.

Throughout the history of the British labour movement the steelworker has remained a distant and largely unrecognised figure. Eclipsed by an aura of solidarity surrounding the miner, the docker, the engineer and the shipbuilder, and undistinguished by any folklore of deprivation or struggle, his occupational identity is distinct and his position within the ranks of manual work obscure. As a source of sociological enquiry the steelworker and his industry have, until recently, proved strangely impenetrable.³⁵

As a new generation of historians busied themselves documenting more fashionable breeds of worker, it once again fell on scholars from ancillary fields to investigate the post-WWII experiences of native steelworkers. Sociologists have surveyed responses to changing working practices, whilst political scientists produced organisational narratives on the role of the state, senior industry officials and, in some instances, trade union bureaucrats.³⁶ Martin Rhodes and Vincent Wright have, for example, produced a scathing critique of the orthodoxy of those tactics adopted by European

³⁵ P. Bowen, M. Shaw and Robin Smith, 'The Steelworker and Work Control: A Sociological Analysis and Industrial Relations Case Study', *British Journal of Industrial Relations (BJIR)*, 12.2 (1974), p. 249.

³⁶ See N. Bacon, N. Blyton and J. Morris, 'Among the Ashes: Trade Union Strategies in the UK and German Steel Industries', *BJIR*, 34.1 (1996), pp. 25-50; P. Bowen, *Social Control in Industrial Organisation: A Strategic and Occupational Study of British Steelmaking* (London, 1976); P. Brannen, E. Batstone, D. Fatchett and W. White, *The Worker Directors: A Sociology of Participation* (London, 1976); R. Hudson and D. Sadler, 'Region, Class and the Politics of Steel Closures in the European Community', *Society and Space*, 1.4 (1983), pp. 405-427; K. Morgan, 'Restructuring Steel: The Crises of Labour and Locality in Britain', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 7.2 (1983), pp. 175-201; D. Sadler, 'Works Closure at British Steel and the nature of the state', *Political Geography Quarterly*, 3.4 (1984), 297-311; and O. E. Smith, *Productivity Bargaining: A Case Study in the Steel Industry* (London, 1971).

and UK steel unions throughout the world steel crisis.³⁷ Geoffrey Dudley and Jeremy Richardson, whilst investigating the overall political context of rationalisation under state ownership, provide a frustratingly limited general overview of the origins of anti-closure campaigns.³⁸

Whilst these broad-spectrum works fail to consider workplace experiences beyond the superficial level, there are a handful of studies that provide at least a partial insight into the perspective of specific facilities.³⁹ Dudley, for example, adopted a case study approach to explore how the Shelton WAC interacted with policymakers in an attempt to alter BSC's chosen industrial development strategy.⁴⁰ Scottish historian David Stewart has documented the fight to save Ravenscraig in the 1980s, providing an account of the role played by a Scottish lobby when persuading decisionmakers to

³⁷ M. Rhodes and Vincent Wright, 'The European and Steel Unions and the Steel Crisis, 1974-84: A Study in the Demise of Traditional Unionism', *British Journal of Political Science*, 18.2 (1988), pp. 171-195.

³⁸ J.J. Richardson and G.F. Dudley, 'Steel Policy in the UK: The Politics of Industrial Decline', in Y. Meny and V. Wright (eds), *The Politics of Steel: Western Europe and the Steel Industry in the Crisis Years (1974-84)* (Berlin, 1987), pp. 308-367.

³⁹ One particular line of academic enquiry has been to probe the impact rationalisation had on steel regions and their inhabitants, with human geographers and sociologists directing their scholarly gaze on experiences in Consett, County Durham, a monotown that lost almost 4,000 jobs in August 1980. See R. Hudson and D. Sadler, 'Anatomy of a Disaster: The Closure of Consett Steelworks', *Northern Economic Review*, 6 (1983), pp. 2-17; K.M. Price, 'Mass Unemployment: The Closure of Consett Steelworks', *Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association* (1982); and F. Robinson and D. Sadler, 'Consett after the Closure', *University of Durham Occasional Publications*, 19 (1984). For an overview of re-industrialisation policies in former iron and steel communities, see S. Young, 'The implementation of Britain's national steel strategy at the local level', in Meny and Wright, *The Politics of Steel*, pp. 368-415.

⁴⁰ G. Dudley, 'Pluralism, Policy Making and Implementation: The Evolution of the British Steel Corporation's Development Strategy with Reference to the Activity of the Shelton Action Committee', *Public Administration*, 57.3 (Autumn 1979), pp. 253-270.

temporarily shelve plans to rundown the huge North Lanarkshire works.⁴¹ However, whilst exploring grassroots anti-closure campaigns from the centre, none of these studies provide any specific details on workplace or extra-workplace experiences.

The only two comprehensive investigations into a defence campaign from a rank and file perspective look at Bilston's former sister plant in Northamptonshire. *Redundancy, Restructuring and the Response of the Labour Movement* by Christopher Baker, and Allen Maunders' *A Process of Struggle*, provide forensic accounts of the local, employee-led campaigns to save Corby works.⁴² As is the case with this thesis, both of these studies appraise the strategic framework adopted by local shop stewards; at the same time offering an exploration of the relationship that developed between an action committee and national trade union officials or political elites. Moreover, they include a personal dimension, using interview data to provide a voice to rank and file steelmen fighting for their livelihoods. They also offer a valuable insight into the internal dynamics of ROSAC, the Corby WAC. The work of Maunders and Baker reveals how Northamptonshire steelmen who, unlike their Bilston colleagues, possessed a history of collective industrial action, remained fiercely independent throughout a campaign that was noted for high-profile fall outs with Parliamentary representatives and union headquarters. Having cut ties with their respective Executives and the TUCSICC, they adopted a more formal organisational leadership

⁴¹ D. Stewart, 'Fighting for Survival: The 1980s Campaign to Save Ravenscraig Steelworks', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 25.1 (2005), pp. 40-57. For another investigation into the campaign to save the Scottish works, see G. Dudley, 'The British Steel Corporation and Problems of Political Management', *The Political Quarterly*, 55.4 (October 1984), pp. 427-437.

⁴² See C. Baker, *Redundancy, Restructuring and the Response of the Labour Movement: A Case Study of British Steel at Corby*, University of Bristol (Bristol, 1982); and A.R. Maunders, *A Process of Struggle: The Campaign for Corby Steelmaking in 1979* (Aldershot, 1987).

hierarchy, before employing a defence strategy that relied on the sustained participation of the wider community. Notwithstanding these fundamental differences to a BJUAC model that, as this thesis asserts, relied heavily on the tactical and logistical support of regional and national labour movement figures, these works, nevertheless, represent the only two exhaustive rank and file studies into the defence of a Corporation facility during the period under review.

The Historiography of the Black Country

Mirroring the literary marginalisation of steel, are works on the Black Country. Writing three decades ago, University of Wolverhampton lecturer and principal editor of *Midland History*, John Benson, reviewed the labour historiography of the region. Acknowledging and lamenting its narrowness, he was nonetheless optimistic about the future, confidently predicting, “in the years to come the study of Black Country labour history will become richer, and recognised as more interesting, than has sometimes been the case in the past”.⁴³

Concerned with factors beyond traditional paradigms of institutionalism or class conflict, a new body of work moved away from union headquarters and the shop-floor, focusing instead on identity, migration, culture and the everyday lives of working-class communities. Sheila Blackburn and Carol Morgan, for example, have deepened our understanding of the role played by women in the local metal bashing industries

⁴³ J. Benson, ‘Black Country History and Labour History’, *Midland History*, 15.1 (1990), p. 100.

throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁴ Another well-furnished topic is race and ethnicity, with several researchers documenting the experiences of commonwealth migrants who arrived in the Black Country in their thousands in the post-WWII period. Mark Duffield's pioneering work on Indian foundry workers, for example, has been complemented with studies exploring community race relations.⁴⁵ Both Rosalind Singleton-Watkiss and Ian Peddie, have broken new territory with illuminating pieces on popular music and youth culture, whilst Benson's own work on Gerald Howard-Smith has delved into sport and class in early twentieth century Wolverhampton.⁴⁶ More recently, contemporary historians have turned their attentions to recording community life and the advent of social housing, focusing on the pioneering work of Otto Neurath and the Vienna Circle in post-war Bilston.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ S.C. Blackburn, 'Sweated Labour and the Minimum Wage: a case study of the Women Chainmakers of Cradley Heath, South Staffordshire, 1850-1950' (University of London Ph.D. thesis, 1984); and C.E. Morgan, *Workers and Gender Identities, 1835-1913: The Cotton and Metal Industries in England* (Abingdon, 2001).

⁴⁵ See M. Duffield, *Black Radicalism and the Politics of Deindustrialisation: The Hidden History of Indian Foundry Workers in the West Midlands* (Aldershot, 1988); R. Dudrah, 'British Bhangra Music as Soundscapes of the Midlands', *Midland History*, 36.2 (2011), pp. 278-291; J. Street, 'Malcolm X, Smethwick, and the Influence of the African American Freedom Struggle on British Race Relations in the 1960s', *Journal of Black Studies*, 38.6 (2008), pp. 932-950; A. Hamblen and R. Seifert, 'Wearing the Turban: The 1967-1969 Sikh Drivers Dispute in Wolverhampton', *HSIR*, 37.1 (2016), pp. 83-111; and S. Hirsch, *In the Shadow of Enoch Powell: Race, Locality and Resistance* (Manchester, 2018).

⁴⁶ See R. Singleton-Watkiss, "'What are you gonna do tonight?', Wait for a phone call I suppose": Girls, Mod Subculture, and Reactions to the Film *Quadrophenia*' in P. Thurschwell (ed.), *Quadrophenia and Mod(ern) Culture* (Basingstoke, 2018), pp. 151-172; Ian Peddie, 'The Bleak Country? The Black Country and the Rhetoric of Escape' in Ian Peddie (ed.), *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest* (Farnham, 2006), pp. 132-148; and J. Benson, 'Sport, Class, and Place: Gerald Howard-Smith and Early Twentieth-Century Wolverhampton', *Midland History*, 37.2 (2012), pp. 207-221.

⁴⁷ M. Amati, 'Otto Neurath and the Example of 1940s Bilston', in R. Freestone and M. Amati, *Engagement and Exhibitionism in the Era of High Modernism* (London, 2014); and E. Harwood, 'Neurath, Riley and Bilston, Pasmore and Peterlee', *Twentieth Century Architecture* 9 (2008).

Notwithstanding the application of new trends in social history, a detailed review of the literature on the region's lay workers reveal no recent additions. Benson has argued that this paucity of work can, in part, be explained by the endurance of the area's dominant manager-owner system, which was determined by its distinctive modes of production. Accordingly, the resilience of small-scale industrial units, in what was known colloquially as 'the workshop of the world', had an enduring impact on working-class consciousness and behaviour. Indeed, the persistence of smaller enterprises ran by paternalistic, omnipotent owners precluded any genuine enthusiasm for industrial action and, moreover, collectivism or self-organisation. The endurance of a compromised, passive class of industrial worker, who enjoyed an intimate relationship with a patriarchal management, did little to enthuse the disciples of rank and filism who sought inspiration elsewhere. The result is a strikingly limited historiography still governed by a small band of literary brothers and sisters.⁴⁸ Benson, having labelled views within the pre-existing body of literature as "banal and condescending", aimed to further explain the impact his luminaries had on wider perceptions of – and interest in – the Black Country's labour history:

It is perhaps not surprising that a small number of historians, seeking to explore developments in the same somewhat overlooked part of the country, and sharing broadly similar economic and institutional approaches towards labour history, should tend to present a consistent – and apparently convincing – view of the Black Country working class ...⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Benson, *Black Country History*, p. 100.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Benson's lament centred on a circle of provincially minded scholars that emerged during what Neville Kirk has dubbed the "golden age" of British labour history.⁵⁰ Joining founding father Alan Fox was the likes of Marie B. Rowlands, Takao Matsumura, Eric Hopkins, Eric Taylor and George Barnsby. Despite writing in an era of academic experimentation that witnessed the widespread advance of history from below, Rowlands persisted with a top-down approach that continued to overemphasise the role elites played in the development of the Black Country's nascent industrial relations culture.⁵¹ Whilst Matsumura, Hopkins and Taylor widened their analytical framework to provide an insight into the experiences and activities of the area's workers, all three were guilty of overstating the feebleness of regional working-class organisation.⁵² Furthermore, they elected to dwell on internal fragmentation and conflict – often ignoring genuine instances of concerted, solidaristic collective action. Benson, frustrated by his peers' overemphasis on the conventionalism and orthodoxy of Black Countrymen, charged, "... they all describe the working-class of the area in much the same way: as exceptional in its internal divisions, its acquiescence, its industrial weakness and its political conservatism".⁵³

⁵⁰ N. Kirk, 'Challenge, Crisis, and Renewal? Themes in the Labour History of Britain, 1960-2010', *LHR*, 75.2 (2010), p. 169.

⁵¹ M.B. Rowlands, *Masters and Men in the West Midland Metalware Trades before the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester, 1975); 'Continuity and Change in an Industrialising Society: The Case of the West Midlands Industries', in P. Hudson (ed.), *Regions and Industries: A Perspective on the Industrial Revolution in Britain* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 103-131.

⁵² E. Hopkins, 'The Working Classes of Stourbridge, 1815-1915' (London University Ph.D. thesis, 1972); 'An Anatomy of Strikes in the Stourbridge Glass Industry, 1850-1914', *Midland History*, 2.1 (1973), pp. 21-31; T. Matsumura, 'The Flint Glass Makers in the Classic Age of the Labour Aristocracy 1850-1880, with Special Reference to Stourbridge' (University of Warwick Ph.D. thesis, 1976); *The Labour Aristocracy Revisited: The Victorian Flint Glass Makers, 1850-80* (Manchester, 1983); and E. Taylor, 'The Working Class Movement in the Black Country 1863-1914' (University of Keele Ph.D. thesis, 1974).

⁵³ Benson, *Black Country History*, p. 101.

If these erstwhile contemporaries aimed to draw scholarly attention to the apparent fragmentation and general passivity of the region's rank and file, the same can't be said for the prolific Barnsby, who assumed the role of the doyen of the Black Country's social and labour history until his death in 2010. From 1967 onwards, the steadfast Stalin apologist, political agitator and activist produced a large collection of books, scholarly journals and open access educational pamphlets on such topics as Black Country Chartism, the Bengal famine, the suffragettes, Robert Owen, social housing and domestic race relations.⁵⁴ Barnsby proved to be an extremely controversial figure, with his writings on the area's working-class movement receiving much warranted criticism for its overtly doctrinaire approach:

There is much to admire in Dr. Barnsby's writing. Its range and vigour are highly commendable and it amounts, in total, to a sizeable corpus of information on the history of labour in the Black Country. It must also be said, however, that much of his interpretation is completely wrong-headed and in consequence his account of working-class activity and attitudes is dangerously misleading in many places.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ See G.J. Barnsby, *A History of Housing in Wolverhampton, 1750 to 1975* (Wolverhampton, 1975); *Chartism in the Black Country* (Wolverhampton, 1980); *The Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie: Social Control in the Nineteenth Century Black Country* (London, 1972); *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country, 1850-1939* (Wolverhampton, 1998); *The Dudley Working Class Movement, 1832-80* (Dudley, 1967); 'The Standard of Living in the Black Country during the Nineteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 24.2 (1971), pp. 220-239; *The Working Class Movement in the Black Country, 1750 to 1867* (Wolverhampton, 1977); and *Social Conditions in the Black Country, 1800-1900* (London, 1980).

⁵⁵ Taylor, *The Working Class Movement*, p. 486.

Indeed, when reading his work, it is difficult to ignore how the fervent evangelist of the 'hard-left militant tendency' would blatantly distort his interpretation of empirical evidence in order to pigeonhole his analysis into a narrow Marxist framework. Reviewing Barnsby's *Social Conditions in the Black Country in the Nineteenth Century*, which has become a standard text for students of the area's working-class and labour movement, Taylor highlighted the subjectivity of his rival's starkly dogmatic approach:

The weakness of Dr. Barnsby's analysis lies essentially in its partiality, which derives from the requirement of his political creed, that it is the first duty of all workers to fight against the capitalist system. The corollary of this is that any working-class activity or organisation is seized on and reported as a manifestation of militancy, and therefore, by inference, making some small contribution to the disruption of bourgeois society, or more hopefully, the overthrow of capitalism.⁵⁶

Notwithstanding such criticisms, the work of Barnsby at least offers an insight into the experiences of region's workers. His *History of Wolverhampton, Bilston & District Trades Union Council*, for example, provides a brief yet valuable snapshot of several grassroots campaigns organised by Black Country shop stewards in the post-WWII period. These included protests supported by Bilston's ex-steelworkers throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ G.J. Barnsby, *A History of Wolverhampton, Bilston and District Trades Union Council, 1865-1990* (Wolverhampton, 1994).

If Barnsby has drawn academic censure for his penchant for hyperbolising the militancy of the region's working-classes, his rival Taylor is not himself beyond reproach – with his doctoral thesis, *The Working-Class Movement in the Black Country, 1850-1914*, belligerently adopting a stale, formulaic approach.⁵⁸ Crucially, the work tends to present local industrial workers as a passive, vacuous huddled mass that were manipulated by industrial, trade union or political elites. In subsequent publications, he specifically propagated the image of a disorganised, unruly and easily subjugated Black Country iron and steelworker. His ISTC commissioned pamphlet, *The Better Temper*, which celebrated the advancement of collective bargaining, conciliation and arbitration in the local trade, provided an outdated top down account of the history of trade union apparatus and employers' organisations.⁵⁹ Unsurprisingly, the voices of the region's lowly lay smelters are absent from his analysis.

Taylor and his colleagues' determination to establish a dominant narrative of the passive, insentient local worker has had clear implications on the study of the region's twentieth century labour history. Contemporary scholars, uninspired by its orthodoxy, have turned their attentions elsewhere, to larger centres of production where the labouring classes possessed higher levels of political and trade union consciousness and a history of concerted collective action. Although, as has been revealed, some recent researchers have concerned themselves with the social and cultural heritage of the Black Country's working-class communities, a shadow has been cast on the

⁵⁸ Taylor, *The Working Class Movement*.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *The Better Temper*.

perceived relevance of the study of the region's post-WWII labour movements and workplace experiences.

An absence of academic studies into the battle to save Bilston works is symptomatic of the wider exclusion of the post-war Black Country labour history and, moreover, that of the UK steel industry. The treatment of the campaign is haphazard at best, with scattered and fleeting references featuring amongst a mere handful of superficial commentaries. In *Hard Labour*, for example, Bill Sirs devotes a meagre two pages to the defence of iron and steelmaking in the Black Country. Whilst praising his members for mounting what he described as a “tremendous struggle for survival”, the ISTC General Secretary, predictably, appears oblivious to his own role in Bilston's eventual downfall.⁶⁰ He was, for example, entirely accurate in his appraisal of the impact BSC's discriminatory commercial practices had on the plant's viability:

The Corporation hoped to load up other units in Sheffield with the orders normally processed at Bilston. This was a policy I had always condemned; customers rarely keep their orders with British Steel once their favourite plant had been closed.⁶¹

Yet, in doing so, he overlooked his role in designing and co-signing national agreements that permitted management to confiscate lucrative sections of Bilston's longstanding orderbook to protect members elsewhere. He also used his personal memoirs to erroneously distance himself from the epoch-making mothballing of the

⁶⁰ Sirs, *Hard Labour*, p. 67.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

plant's Blast Furnace Department in October 1977. Instead, in what was a manifestation of a near permanently fragmented union landscape within steel, he laid the blame on members of the NUB, the ISTC's rival production union:

Bilston had one single blast furnace and the blastfurnacemen who manned it were persuaded to allow the furnace to be taken off so that a 'repair' could be carried out. Whether there was any real urgency about the repair I shall never know, but the blast furnace was never brought back into operation and I do not think the Corporation ever intended that it should.⁶²

It should be noted that, in a bid to deflect pressure from his own Executive, Sirs had previously criticised his own Bilston members for allowing the vessel to be taken offline, handily omitting the fact that union headquarters had done little more than pass a resolution lamenting the decision.⁶³ Furthermore, for the sake of historical accuracy, it is important to reveal the fundamental flaws in the union chief's above depiction, with the onetime crane driver confusing the blast furnace decision with the cynical reduction of steelmaking operations fifteen months later. This observation may appear somewhat pedantic, but it draws attention to Sirs' lack of technical expertise; an issue that was repeatedly exposed during the TUCSICC's ill-fated attempt to persuade policymakers to invest in pioneering steelmaking apparatus in the Black Country.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

⁶³ On the eve of the plant's closure Sirs infuriated local steelmen by telling the press, "Yes, Bilston is difficult for us because our members there allowed the blast furnace to go off for what was supposed to be a temporary period ...". See *The British Steelmaker*, April 1979.

Sirs' former research assistant, Martin Upham, also makes a fleeting reference to the Bilston campaign in *Tempered*:

A suddenly posted letter of intent to close Bilston Works early provoked dramatic events at Scarborough, where the 1978 ADC was meeting. An emergency Executive authorised Sirs to make the only possible response to this attempt to dump procedure: BSC was threatened with a national strike [over Bilston] unless the letter was withdrawn. This was perhaps the high point of the resistance to closures. Few who heard it would forget Sirs' electrifying speech to the conference: it eloquently captured the grim mood of determination of every delegate ... This ISTC action gave BSC the jolt it needed, and the notice was withdrawn inside a day: there now followed a lengthy series of meetings which gave representatives the opportunity to take their case to the wider movement. It was a much-needed success ...⁶⁴

In his fervent desire to throw praise at his then union bosses, Upham fails to acknowledge the role played by BJUAC leader Dennis Turner, who deliberately manipulated events to leave Sirs and the Confederation Executive with little choice but to threaten a national strike on their plant's behalf. It is notable how, in later works, Upham disclosed the insincerity of the June 1978 strike call.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Upham, *Tempered*, pp.126-127.

⁶⁵ Upham also admitted Bilston was closed without "national resistance". See Upham, *Retrospect and Prospects*, p. 10.

In a slightly fuller, yet even more unsatisfactory account, Wolverhampton academics, Dr. Frank Reeves and Professor Mel Chevannes devote a whole chapter of their sanctioned biography of Dennis Turner to the campaign. Lacking in both basic research, empirical data and academic rigour, *Real Labour* provides the reader with little more than an approximate guide to local and national events.⁶⁶ Misleadingly titled 'Saving the Steel Works', the chapter is riddled with errors.⁶⁷ The most striking of these are driven by the authors' political beliefs which, like Barnsby, were of the hard left.⁶⁸ Likewise, in their patent desire to lavish praise on the actions of Turner who, as a political activist and town Councillor had forged close personal links with the authors, they deliberately aggrandize certain aspects of the defence campaign. Ignoring the many examples of workplace resistance orchestrated throughout the period, they boldly liken an isolated and extraordinary example of militancy at Bilston to one of the most effective examples of concerted workplace direct action in post-WWII Britain:

The steelworkers' take-over of production at Bilston, under Dennis's leadership, was on a par with the 'work-in' led by Jimmy Reid to save shipbuilding on the Upper Clyde, but has remained largely unsung except in Bilston itself.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ F. Reeves and M. Chevannes, *Real Labour: The Biography of Dennis Turner* (Wolverhampton, 2014), pp. 57-64.

⁶⁷ The long list of historical inaccuracies includes confusing the dates of mass meetings and public demonstrations, misnaming a major steel union, whilst excluding key personnel from the BJUAC line-up. Altogether, these deficiencies combine to undermine the legitimacy of *Real Labour*.

⁶⁸ Like Barnsby, Dr. Reeves was a member of Wolverhampton's CPGB, contesting local elections on behalf of the party.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

As a study sanctioned by the former BJUAC leader from his deathbed, the authors of *Real Labour* repeatedly ascribe too much agency to their friend and his action committee colleagues, wilfully omitting the contribution made by the hundreds of lay workers who helped maintain performance levels for almost a decade. Aside from its obvious shortcomings, the work, nonetheless, provides context to Turner's upbringing and his career as a community and political activist, as well as his time in local and national Government.

One piece that does – albeit briefly – pay attention to the efforts of the wider workforce, as well as the BJUAC, is Barnsby's abovementioned chronicle of the WB&DTUC, published over a decade after the works shut:

The other case, which even more directly affected employment in Wolverhampton was the closure of Bilston Steel Works. Again, there was a long history of neglect. An attempt to close the works had been made in 1975 but was thwarted by mass protest. But in 1978 despite its products being sold profitably (but not profitably enough, claimed British Steel), closure was decreed. An Action Committee was formed with Councillor Dennis Turner, who in 1987 became Bilston's MP, in the leadership. Deputations to the EEC and Bob Edwards' intervention with Eric Varley, the Labour Industry Secretary were unavailing. A go-slow of 450 workers immediately scheduled for the sack in July 1980 failed to move the steel board and the last 450 men left in July 1981.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Barnsby, *A History of*, p. 77.

Despite stressing the role of rank and file steelworkers and the support of a regional shop steward movement, Barnsby's analysis includes absolutely no reference to the various strategic phases of the campaign. Such a cursory account, penned by the Black Country's most prolific labour historian, highlights the marginalisation of the battle for Bilston from the region's already limited historiography.⁷¹

This brief survey of the literature reveals how the twentieth century industrial relations history of both steel and the Black Country have been badly served by post-WWII labour historians. The thesis looks to address the gaps in the historiography by providing an analysis of workplace resistance to industrial change and rationalisation undertaken within a state-owned facility during a period of economic restructuring and crisis. The study seeks to shine a spotlight on patterns of accommodation as well as resistance, demonstrated by a traditionally moderate rank and file compelled to self-organise in response to commercial mismanagement and the failings of the trade union and political establishment.

It presents the fullest historical account of WAC activity from the workers' perspective to date. Here, locality is key, with the aforementioned exclusion of the Black Country from the labour historiography prompting a desire to produce a history of what Richard

⁷¹ For two, largely inadequate, references to the Bilston campaign see G. Bamber, *Militant Managers?: Managerial unionism and industrial relations* (Aldershot, 1986), pp. 118-119; and C. Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers: The Sons of Vulcan* (London, 1983), p. 135. Meanwhile, an unpublished MPhil dissertation by Matthew Beebee delves into the Bilston experience. By failing to consult surviving employees or the material held within BCA's ITSOE collection, the author provides a rather narrow empirically limited perspective. See M. Beebee, 'Steel, Class, and Community: industrial work and its decline in Bilston' (University of Cambridge M.Phil. dissertation, 2018).

Price has referred to as those who had “hitherto been without a history”.⁷² The work represents the only significant study documenting the post-war workplace experiences of the misrepresented and often overlooked Black Country industrial worker.

Adopting a micro-history approach, there is a clear and intentional personal element to the work. This was prompted, in part, by Harold Perkins’ call for “working-class history from the inside”:

Working-class history there is plenty, too, but apart from memoirs of exceptional individuals it is almost entirely the story of the wage-earning majority as a class, the impersonal mass which left its chief record in the criminal records and other administrative statistics of government, the ‘poor’ who appear in the patronising memoirs of their betters, or the faceless institutional groupings of ‘organised labour’. Working-class history from the inside, the history of real people with names and faces and lives to live which left little or no trace in the records ... is rare indeed.⁷³

Likewise, by forensically examining local events, the research seeks to provide ordinary, provincial workers with “full historical citizenship”, as advocated by E.P. Thompson over six decades ago:

The national historian still tends to have a curiously distorted view of goings-on ‘in the provinces’. Provincial events are seen as shadowy incidents or

⁷² R. Price, ‘Histories of Labour and Labour History’, *LHR*, 75.3 (2010), p. 267.

⁷³ C.S. Davies, *North Country Bred: A Working-Class Family Chronicle* (London, 1963), p. 1.

accountable spontaneous upheavals on the periphery of the national scene, which the London wire-pullers try to cope with and put into their correct historical pattern. And provincial leaders are commonly denied full historical citizenship; if mentioned at all, they are generally credited with various worthy second-class abilities, but rarely regarded as men with their own problems, their own capacity for initiative, and on occasions a particular genius ...⁷⁴

Nevertheless, despite this thesis being written predominantly from the perspective of the worker at plant-level, it adopts an ecumenical analytical framework, fusing together labour, political, industrial, and economic history. As such, it provides what McIlroy *et al.* have referred to as a “totalised” approach that incorporates:

... a consideration of industrial politics, from above and below. This necessitates an examination of politics not only at the level of the state, but inside unions and parties. It requires address of politics not only inside these institutions but also inside the workplace, and in the values and actions of trade unionists. Our concern must be not only with the politics of the labour movement, its activists and broader working-class but with the politics of capital and the management of labour, an area that has been relatively ignored.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ E.P. Thompson, ‘Homage to Tom Maguire’, in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds), *Essays in Labour History: In Memory of G.D.H. Cole* (London, 1960).

⁷⁵ McIlroy, *British Trade Unions*, p. 10.

Chapter 2: The Making of a Steel Town

The purpose of this chapter is scene setting, placing the battle for Bilston into full historical context. Its scope is extremely broad, covering a two-century period of the plant's industrial and commercial heritage. We start by briefly exploring the role the state traditionally played in the domestic iron and steel industry, which culminated in a second nationalisation under the Labour Government in July 1967. It provides a detailed account of the commercial heritage of the Black Country metals industry, with a narrow focus on Bilston works. It is suggested that, as rival producers struggled to cope with regular cyclical fluctuations in trade, the site flourished during the industry's many economic downturns. This, the chapter demonstrates, was a result of the parsimony of its diligent employees, as well as their relationship with regional steel users; two factors that ensured Bilston's profitable record was sustained under public ownership. Another was a multi-million pound investment scheme undertaken in the mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, it is revealed how, by prizing tradition over innovation, the plant's owners sowed the seeds for its demise two decades later.

The chapter also maps the evolution of the industrial relations culture of iron and steel. Charting the origins and development of the ISTC's ideological underpinnings, it subsequently outlines the union landscape at Bilston works on the eve of renationalisation. By contextualising what is revealed to be an extremely low level of union consciousness at the plant, it asserts that, under private ownership, Bilston's temperate workforce developed an aversion to radical industrial action. The chapter concludes by suggesting that, despite this phenomenon, senior shop stewards developed a tradition of actively participating in the political life of the Black Country

town. This, it is argued, helped determine the early strategic approach adopted by the BJUAC.

Steel and State: a Brief History

The Labour Government brought into public ownership the fourteen largest domestic steel producers, a merger that created one of the biggest industrial organisations in the western world.¹ The primary objective, according to Whitehall, was to permit this strategically important industry to modernise in an orderly and socially conscientious manner – a feat the steel firms had repeatedly failed to achieve. Yet this was by no means the first instance of state intervention, which had become standard practice in the twentieth century iron and steel trade.

The industry had been subject to some measure of public control since the Great Depression when, in 1932, Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald agreed to shield domestic firms from foreign steel by way of state-sanctioned tariff protection. In exchange, company bosses reluctantly accepted a limited degree of supervision from Whitehall. The BISF, a trade organisation established by the National Government, was handed the unenviable task of coordinating future direction. A key responsibility was to rationalise and modernise a trade that continued to be undermined by the prevalence of small family concerns stubbornly refusing to abandon unprofitable and

¹ Nationalisation left a substantial private sector steel industry consisting of 110 companies employing 95,000 workers across 160 sites. These units typically converted semi-finished steel into finished products, relying on special steel sourced from state-owned facilities such as Bilston.

technically backward Victorian-era plants.² Although some degree of vertical integration did occur in the interwar period, the firms were patently unwilling to reorganise. As the nation prepared for WWII, the industry's organisational framework was still dominated by unambitious owner-management teams who possessed neither the necessary financial muscle, nor the dynamism required to oversee vital capital-intensive modernisation schemes. This situation led Derek Aldcroft to speculate:

[The] suppression of competition rather than technical reconstruction and rationalisation of the industry appears to have been the primary object of the controlling authorities. The principles of plant specialisation and integration of units were only tentatively applied (for example, in the building of a new integrated steel works at Corby), whilst only scant attention was paid to the question of extending best practice techniques.³

Failure to reconstruct was briefly obscured by rearmament, with sizeable profits realised throughout the late 1930s and the war. This revival in fortunes, nonetheless, obscured a painful reality. Wartime demand encouraged the abandonment of major modernisation projects and the recommissioning of obsolete plant. Machinery was run flat out, thus shortening its future lifespan. By the cessation of hostilities, the basic structure and condition of the industry had hardly altered since WWI. As such, the UK would begin the post-war period handicapped by small, antiquated, technically backward facilities ran by notoriously conservative steel companies that were happy

² For a review of the role of the BISF throughout the inter-war years, see McEachern, *A Class Against*, pp. 45-54.

³ D.H. Aldcroft, *The Inter War Economy, 1919-1939* (London, 1970), p. 173.

to simply rest on their laurels. Nevertheless, the wartime experience would have serious consequences for the industry's relationship with the state, with Reuben Kelf-Cohen asserting that, from here on in, steel would become a "political football".⁴

As peace prospered, Clement Attlee's post-WWII Labour Government advocated a Keynesian macroeconomic policy; pushing for key sections of the economy to be brought under the auspices of the state. After numerous delays caused by the blocking action of the steel firms and their friends within Conservative opposition, the industry was finally nationalised in February 1951.⁵

The first experiment with public ownership was intended to provide a unique platform from which the state could reconstruct the industry centrally and methodically. However, following eight months of inactivity on the development front, a Tory Government committed to denationalisation came to power. Although Winston Churchill's re-election prompted a return to the private sector, a measure of state supervision was maintained. A new ISB consisting of Whitehall officials, steel company bosses and even union leaders, was handed the responsibility of overseeing reorganisation via Government-sanctioned five-year redevelopment plans. With nationalisation off the agenda, a new sense of corporate optimism returned along with a decade-long upturn in the trade cycle. Between 1950 and 1960, the combined annual profits of the twelve largest firms grew steadily. Against a backdrop of

⁴ Kelf-Cohen, *British Nationalisation*, p. 106.

⁵ For an extensive overview of the decision to nationalise steel, see W. Fienbergh and R. Eveley, *Steel is Power*. Meanwhile, opposition to state ownership is covered by R. Ranieri, 'Partners and enemies: The government's decision to nationalise steel, 1944-48', in R. Millward and J. Singleton (eds), *The Political Economy of Nationalisation in Britain, 1920-1950* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 275-308; and Vaizey, *The History of*, pp. 121-128.

unprecedented demand, the ISB ushered in several major modernisation plans and, with a moderate increase in capital investment, productive capacity grew gradually.⁶

Whilst the steel firms and their political supporters congratulated themselves, the industry was operating within what social geographer David Heal has described as a “fair weather edifice”.⁷ Fiercely independent and risk averse, post-war domestic producers stood still as international rivals took full advantage. In 1945, the UK was producing 12m t/p/a, while Japan, for example, registered an output of only 1m t/p/a. By 1967 this figure was a staggering 93m t/p/a, with the UK standing at a lowly 28m t/p/a.⁸ Elizabeth Cottrell has identified the role political uncertainty played in the firms’ reticence to expand, particularly with the Labour Party committing to renationalisation under the leadership of Harold Wilson.⁹ Conversely, John Redwood has more accurately established that the investment record of the private sector in the decade before renationalisation was “surprisingly credible”.¹⁰ The principal reason for this relative decline was in fact a reluctance to keep abreast of advances occurring elsewhere. As domestic firms adopted an overly cautious approach, foreign rivals took giant leaps of faith in new steelmaking technology. A clear technical gap emerged, as identified by Peter Brannen *et al.*:

⁶ The post-war performance of the private steel firms is covered extensively by D. Burn, *The Steel Industry, 1939-1959*; and Keeling and Wright, *The Development of*, pp. 85-133.

⁷ Heal, *The Steel Industry*, p. 103.

⁸ The Asian powerhouse wasn’t the only steelmaking nation to leave the UK in its wake. In 1950 West Germany was producing 14m t/p/a, rising to 45m t/p/a only two decades later. See *Man and Metal*, June 1972.

⁹ Cottrell, *The Giant*, p. 135.

¹⁰ Redwood, *Public Enterprise*, p. 79.

Essentially the industry did not change its ways; concern with the maintenance of the autonomy of individual companies, and of private profit tempered only by considerations of the potential of public opinion, meant limited reorganisation and the policy of patching; essentially the continuation of a decades old habit which served merely to make any reorganisation more difficult.¹¹

Years later, some of the BJUAC's political supporters blamed BSC's woes on the failings of capital in this period:

The post-war nationalisation was effectively sabotaged by the steel bosses, until their friends the Tories could get back into office to denationalise again. For the next fifteen years the new oxygen techniques which were being introduced in the rest of the world were ignored in favour of the out-dated coal burning open-hearth method. The result of this was that by 1967, when the industry was re-nationalised, the average British steelmaking plant produced a mere 90 tons per man year, as against 210 tons pmy in an average plant and a Japanese figure of 250 tons pmy.¹²

With Harold Macmillan's Tory Government in a state of disarray, a rejuvenated Labour Party developed a new nationalising agenda. In a March 1961 Parliamentary debate, shadow Chancellor Wilson decreed:

¹¹ Brannen *et al.*, *The Worker Directors*, p. 63.

¹² Workers' Unity pamphlet, 20 July 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/3, p. 3.

On the other hand, the Labour Party stands four square and resolved behind the proposition that the steel industry must be renationalised, that this essential industry must be owned and controlled by the nation and accountable to the nation which it exists, or should exist, to serve. That is the basic issue between us in this debate. I hope that there will be no shadow of any misunderstanding about the difference between the two sides of the House on this.¹³

The October 1964 general election, which Wilson's party won with a slight majority, was dominated by the ideological battle for the industry. Although the Iron and Steel Bill was originally prepared in May 1965, the new Prime Minister was forced to spend his first ministry readdressing the huge balance of payments deficit inherited from his predecessors. After securing an extended majority of 98 in March 1966, he would set about launching the next phase of his adventurous industrial strategy.¹⁴

A History of Steelmaking in Bilston

The cutting of the Birmingham-to-Wolverhampton canal in 1773 saw an embryonic pig iron industry emerge on the north-western edge of Bilston, a small pastoral parish in South Staffordshire. The opening of the 'cut' heralded the dawn of a new age for a sleepy rural hamlet that, only two decades later, would be home to 15 of the UK's 21 coke-fired blast furnaces.¹⁵ With a potential capacity of 48,000 t/p/a, much of Bilston's

¹³ 637 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1961) col. 597.

¹⁴ For a damning critique of renationalisation, see G.W. Ross, *The Nationalisation of Steel: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (London, 1965). Meanwhile, Ovenden, *Politics of Steel*, pp. 42-74, offers a fascinating insight into internal conflict within the Labour Party over the move.

¹⁵ J.M. Price, *The Story of Bilston* (Bilston, 1951), p. 20.

crude pig iron was transported to local workshops or forges, where it was converted into a wide array of industrial or domestic hardware products.¹⁶ The expansion of the town's principal industry was spearheaded by early generations of independent ironmasters known for their advanced technical expertise and business acumen.¹⁷ During the Napoleonic Wars, South Staffordshire was transformed into one of the great ironmaking regions in the world, with Bilston its beating heart.

In the 1840s, the industry suffered from what would be the first of a series of cyclical fluctuations. Notwithstanding a temporary upturn, brought on by a brief spike in demand for bulkier goods, the area's once all-powerful pig iron industry entered a period of terminal decline.¹⁸ By 1864, 58 of the region's blast furnaces stood idle.¹⁹ Two decades later, this figure had swollen to 123. Pig iron, the basis of the area's economy, suddenly found itself marginalised by cheap, mass-produced steel flooding in from rival regions. This shift in spatial arrangement saw local ironmasters' traditional customer base completely disappear, with Black Country iron confined to the

¹⁶ James MacAulay, editor of *The Leisure Hour*, marvelled at the range of goods produced in the town, "Bilston is spoken of as the centre of the hardware trade. It is famous for its grindstones (said to give it its name), and, moreover, has manufactories of tin-plate (for the million), and japanned and enamelled ware, including coal vases, trays, tea-caddies, baths, toilet services etc. Among the curiosities of manufacture, it may be mentioned that more than 2,000 tea-caddies, and not less than 50,000 waiters, are made weekly ...". See J. MacAulay (ed.), *The Leisure Hour: An Illustrated Magazine for Home Reading* (London, 1872), p. 429.

¹⁷ The first generation of Black Country ironmasters were celebrated for their ability to innovate, with many making vital contributions to the advancement of their burgeoning trade. They were also noted for their commercial pragmatism, constantly looking to vary their product portfolios in accordance with the demands of an everchanging domestic and international market. See Shill, *South Staffordshire*.

¹⁸ For a detailed overview of the collapse of the Black Country iron trades, see W.K.V. Gale, *Black Country Iron*.

¹⁹ The British Association for the Advancement of Science, *Birmingham and its Regional Setting: A Scientific Survey* (Birmingham, 1950), p. 237.

manufacture of specialist, low value items such as chains, anchors and tubes. By 1904, output had plummeted to a lowly 0.34m t/p/a and, compounding matters further, the decline of iron overlapped with the retrenchment of the district's auxiliary mining industry.²⁰

Several issues contributed to the demise of the Black Country's independent iron trade.²¹ The foremost factor, according to historians, was the actions – or inactions – of the region's ironmasters.²² As the rest of British industry underwent a period of reinvention and diversification during the final years of Queen Victoria's reign, local industrialists stood still; stubbornly refusing to embrace new technologies adopted elsewhere. The distinguished steelmaker Henry Bessemer, for example, was roundly scoffed at when touring the area with his revolutionary production methods.²³ By the turn of the century, the Black Country was home to only three fully-integrated iron and steelmaking firms.²⁴ One of these was the Springvale plant, a facility that would later become known as Bilston works.

²⁰ Allen, *Industrial Development*, p. 283

²¹ These included the exhaustion of local raw material supplies, a sharp increase in the costs of carriage and the collapse of the Atlantic home and hardware trade.

²² W.K.V. Gale identified a "curiously insular attitude" amongst a final generation of Black Country Ironmasters who refused to neither, "disclose their methods nor pay heed to others". See Gale, *Black Country Iron*, p. 109. Similarly, G. Barnsby identified a form of "entrepreneurial inertia". See *Barnsby, Socialism*, p. 75.

²³ Another damning indictment of the disdain these proud industrialists had for pioneering technology came from inventor Richard Tangye, "This is fair example of the way S. Staffs. ironmasters treated inventors ... the consequence being that their trade has left them and gone to districts where proprietors and managers are more enlightened". See R. Tangye, *One and All: An Autobiography of Richard Tangye* (London, 1889), pp. 98-99.

²⁴ The first major collapse occurred in 1877 with the closure of the nearby Shrubbery Ironworks, which was owned by the Mayor of Wolverhampton. The closure of this well-known family firm sent shockwaves through the local mercantile community. Historian William Jones documented the impact

Purchased in 1866 by a young and ambitious businessman called Alfred Hickman, the site had prospered as local rivals fell by the wayside. If the demise of Black Country iron was foreshadowed by the relative backwardness of the final generation of independent masters, Bilston's survival can be explained by its owner's technical and commercial expertise. The son of a successful master himself, Hickman was apprenticed as an iron merchant, acquiring first-hand experience of the trade's commercial dealings; before training as metallurgist. Alfred subsequently inherited extensive business interests from his father, providing the capital required to purchase his own works.

The Springvale site had been neglected by the previous owner, leaving a measly overall productive capacity of 50,000 t/p/a.²⁵ Hickman's immediate concern was, therefore, to oversee a capital-intensive modernisation scheme, raising production in line with rivals in Northern England and Wales. Between 1866 and 1880, the plant's crumbling brick furnaces were replaced with larger, modern vessels, making the firm the leading producer of specialist pig iron in the entire Midlands. The development programme also rendered the works one of the most technologically advanced operations in Europe. Unlike his contemporaries, the dynamic Hickman knew the future lay primarily in steel and, to a lesser extent, high value wrought iron goods. His decision to expand his firm's product portfolio coincided with the discovery by Sidney

such closures had on the population of the town, "The effect was soon felt, and in a short time thousands of families were on the point of starvation. Everyday crowds of hungry labouring men could be seen blocking up the thoroughfares opposite the Town Hall, North Street, and the Union Workhouse on the Bilston Road, all clamouring for work and bread". See W.H. Jones, *Story of the Municipal Life of Wolverhampton* (London, 1903).

²⁵ *The Ingot*, July 1919.

Thomas and Percy Gilchrist of a process that enabled the widespread manufacture of lucrative special steels from the kind of phosphorous rich pig iron Hickman's company specialised in. Alfred immediately recognised the potential of the so-called 'Thomas-Gilchrist process' and, having conducted a series of trials, became one of the first major domestic producers to adopt the revolutionary technique.²⁶ New melting shop and finishing ends enabled the fully-integrated site to manufacture a range of precisely measured goods for a global market.²⁷ Eventually, the ambitious experimental expansion scheme drew praise from industry's principal trade magazine:

The completely modern character of the great Spring Vale establishment makes it almost incongruous, situated as it is in the heart of a district whose weakness for many years has been the old-fashioned character of many of the existing plants.²⁸

Another key feature of Hickman's successful business model was the application of an interminable and all-encompassing efficiency drive. Witnessing first-hand the dramatic collapse of the local trade, the young industrialist was aware that the downfall of his fellow ironmasters was, in part, caused by a failure to source low-cost raw materials following the exhaustion of local coal, iron ore and limestone deposits. To improve economies of scale, Alfred purchased several mineral estates outside his

²⁶ In what proved to be a shrewd move, Hickman invited Percy Gilchrist to join his board of directors.

²⁷ Although works concentrated on supplying special steels to the local electrical construction, engineering and motor vehicle industries, it also delivered to Europe and the United States. The subsequent installation of a primary mill also ensured the firm could enter the domestic tube trade.

²⁸ *The Iron Trade Review*, 6 February 1908.

Midlands hub.²⁹ Alarmed by spiralling transport costs, he also developed an interconnecting system of sidings linking the works to the national rail network, acquiring his own locomotives in the process. Another cost-cutting tactic involved purchasing bankrupt stock and equipment from insolvent rivals.³⁰ Likewise, the enterprising steel baron successfully exploited the waste gas produced by his blast furnaces to power the entire plant. Another ingenious example of Hickman's resourcefulness was his utilisation of basic slag as a road surface, thereby providing an additional revenue stream that countered the financial impact of the industry's regular downturns.³¹

By the turn of the century, one of the UK's last surviving independent producers was sitting on the executive committees of prestigious national institutions like BITA, BMA and the Board of Trade. Back in the Black Country, he served as the President of the Wolverhampton Chamber of Commerce and District Engineering Society. As head of SISI, Alfred looked to address the relative backwardness of his fellow masters by inviting Europe's most eminent industrialists to deliver papers on a range of technical matters. The list of guest speakers included Frederick Siemens, Percy Gilchrist and Benjamin Talbot. Concerned by the relatively antiquated nature of local blast furnace

²⁹ Although Bilston lay above vast coal and ironstone fields, they had been wastefully exploited by ironmasters. With the gradual abandonment of the town's mineral fields in the mid-1860s, the surviving ironworks were forced to rely on expensively sourced raw materials, thereby squeezing ever-shrinking profit margins even further. A concerned Hickman responded by purchasing a number of collieries and ironstone quarries in Nuneaton, Banbury, Oxfordshire and North Wales.

³⁰ The machinery used to build his steelmaking plant, for example, was acquired from a bankrupt works in the North West. See *A Brief History of the Bilston Iron and Steelworks*, WCA, DX894/9/3/2.

³¹ In January 1905 Tarmac was opened next to Bilston works, with Alfred its Chairman. When the plant was eventually closed over seven decades later, the former sister company purchased the site from BSC and, following a series of delays, redeveloped the land for commercial use and housing.

practice, he invited the illustrious inventor Edward A. Cowper who, in an opening address, singled out Alfred for praise, "I am quite satisfied that if Staffordshire is to hold her own in the manufacture of pig iron ... other ironmasters may see their way to follow the example he has set".³² Hickman's contribution to the commercial and technical advancement of the industry was eventually recognised by his peers:

His whole life has been devoted to the development of the industry which he now adorns, and although 77 years of age, he is hale, robust and vigorous, still planning new schemes to keep his great establishment not merely abreast, but, if possible, ahead of his time. In mental outlook, it may be said that Sir Alfred will never grow old. His passion for the very latest things in mechanics is shown by the arrangements he is making to install at the works of Alfred Hickman, Ltd., Spring Vale, Wolverhampton, electrical rolling mills, with reversing gear on, the principles described at the May meeting of the Iron and Steel Institute by D. Selby-Bigge, of Newcastle-on-Tyne. When his paper was not two months old, Sir Alfred had already sketched out a plan for the installation of these mills at a cost, probably, somewhere near £70,000. This rapid evolution of a new scheme very well exemplifies Sir Alfred's habit of swift decision, and his genius for sizing up whatever is submitted to his clear, ripe and experienced judgement. His views on the need of up-to-date methods were very well epitomized in the brief interview THE IRON TRADE REVIEW representative had with Sir Alfred at his charming London residence in Kensington Palace

³² W.M. Larke, 'South Staffs. Works Managers', *The Blackcountryman*, 1.2 (1968), p. 41.

Gardens, overlooking Hyde Park: 'You have got to be moving the whole time or you'll be left behind. The world never stops'.³³

In 1902 an aging Alfred handed the reins of the business to his son Edward, who had previously been employed at the works in various capacities.³⁴ Like his father before him, the young entrepreneur eagerly embraced all aspects of the trade, demonstrating sound commercial judgement and an astute knowledge of experimental technology. Adopting a hands-on approach, he continued Alfred's modernising agenda by transforming the facility into one of the largest family-owned steelmaking concerns in the UK.³⁵ With demand increasing by nearly a quarter during WWI, Edward displayed his entrepreneurial zeal by opening an armaments plant.³⁶ By now, the pattern of ownership in the UK iron and steel industry had already been completely transformed, with family concerns replaced by large corporate interests. A stubborn Edward rejected repeated takeover bids, but in 1920 he finally relented, selling his family's majority shareholding to S&L.

Under the leadership of its enterprising young Chairman Allan MacDiarmid, the Scottish-based firm had become one of the most proactive domestic steel companies,

³³ *The Iron Trade Review*, 6 February 1908.

³⁴ Alfred had ensured Edward was grounded in all aspects of the trade by employing him as an apprentice, a salesman and a Deputy Director before joining the main board.

³⁵ In 1906, for example, Edward installed a Siemens-Martins OH furnace, which combined pig iron with scrap to produce basic steel in large quantities. Like his father, he was an enthusiastic innovator, designing an experimental refrigeration unit next to his Blast Furnace Department. However, when the unit proved defective, the frugal Edward retained it as an onsite larder.

³⁶ This would signal the start of long-term and highly lucrative arrangement with the MOD that continued until the site closed in April 1979.

described by John Vaizey as a firm ran by “dynamic people”.³⁷ Between the wars, MacDiarmid oversaw an expansion strategy that centred on acquiring a number of smaller concerns, playing a key role in BISF supervised rationalisation programmes.³⁸ The Scotsman, who also headed S&L’s development committee, oversaw the building of the UK’s only new greenfield works at Corby, Northamptonshire. The state-of-the-art site was described as an, “exemplar of what many people inside and especially outside steel thought could be done if steelmen really tried”.³⁹ Realising the financial opportunity presented by rearmament in the 1930s, the firm transformed Bilston into a lucrative and strategically important production unit that supplied tens of thousands of shells and pipes for the Normandy landings.⁴⁰

With the first nationalisation ending in failure, the facility would receive a complete makeover. A decade on from WWII, its parent company, now under the stewardship of A.G. Stewart, looked to transform the works. The first stage of his £16m nine-year modernisation and expansion project began in 1952, with the erection of a new flagship blast furnace. Named Elisabeth, in honour of Stewart’s youngest daughter, she was the only vessel in the UK capable of producing high-quality pig iron from low-cost iron ore. Moreover, as a scavenger furnace, she was able to function using unsorted low-grade scrap metal that could be purchased cheaply from local authority depots:

³⁷ Vaizey, *The History*, p. 66.

³⁸ Bilston was joined by approximately twenty-two West Midland sister sites.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁰ During WWII, Bilston’s ‘A’ furnace achieved a world record output. For a detailed account of the plant’s contribution to the war effort, see S&L, *An Industrial War Record* (Corby, 1946).

Elisabeth? She was brilliant at producing iron, absolutely brilliant. When she was built, she was an experimental hot blast furnace. She could use coke with oxygen and air; she could use oil with oxygen and air; and she could use gas with oxygen and air. And this is what made the place special.⁴¹

Standing at 212ft, Elisabeth soon became a regional landmark and, as the sole surviving blast furnace in the Black Country, an incredible source of pride for the town's inhabitants. As a symbol of survival and industrial renewal, she was anthropomorphised as the Grand Old Lady of Bilston, though she would be forever be known as 'Big Lizzie' to the men. Stewart subsequently turned his attentions to expanding Bilston's melting shop, installing six oil-fired OH furnaces. The redevelopment of the heavy-end amplified potential productive capacity to 0.7m t/p/a, whilst the installation of ancillary rolling mills enabled S&L to provide a diverse range of high-value semi-finished products for the lucrative Black Country metal bashing trade. With the plant's workforce swelling to 3,000, the period in question is today fondly remembered by older generations as the 'golden age of steel'.

Though the investment programme was celebrated by industry outsiders, Stewart's attachment to OH steelmaking ultimately sowed the seeds of Bilston's demise under BSC two decades later. Having commissioned a costly flagship blast furnace, he was reluctant to abandon hot metal practices when looking to upgrade the Melting Shop Department five years later. At this stage, however, traditional OHs were being superseded by electric arc furnaces at special steel producers elsewhere. In 1962, for example, USC commissioned a new cold metal steelmaking complex in South

⁴¹ Oral testimony from J. Vincent, recorded 15 October 2014, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

Yorkshire. The long-term impact this investment decision had on the fate of Bilston cannot be overestimated. Later chapters will assert how BSC officials with professional links to USC decided to sacrifice the Black Country works in favour of more modern sites in Sheffield and Rotherham.⁴²

Although S&L's malinvestment eventually sounded the death knell at Bilston, the plant proved a consistency profitable concern, producing carbon steels and tubes for the expanding and highly lucrative Midland car and engineering industries.⁴³ In 1957 the facility was operating at 100 per cent capacity as demand for steel ingots and tubes rose by 16.6 and 12 per cent respectively.⁴⁴ As Bilston entered the new decade, S&L's board of directors were so concerned by a local labour shortage they began ferrying in experienced steelmen from Scotland.

The plant's longstanding profitable record was down to several factors. Firstly, 'Big Lizzie' proved to be the most efficient vessel in the UK, providing the melting shop workers with a continuous supply of high-quality, low cost pig iron. Secondly, its workforce developed a close relationship with their loyal customer base, consistently meeting the needs of hundreds of Black Country 'metal bashers'.⁴⁵ Lastly, they

⁴² For an account of the development of electric arc steelmaking in South Yorkshire, see Heal, *The Steel Industry*, pp. 164-165; and R. Peddie, *The United Steel Companies Limited 1918-1968, A History* (Manchester, 1969).

⁴³ Whilst still maintaining its traditional output of tube-steel and high grade pig iron, the plant would expand its range of products, sizes and steel qualities; serving a wide range of local 'metal bashing' industries with high-quality ingots, blooms, billets, slabs and rounds.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 1 February 1956.

⁴⁵ At the time of nationalisation, the plant's metallurgical department employed approximately 70 technicians who each performed quality control duties in the melting shop and rolling mills. Supporting them was a team of chemists who tested each product before they left the works. Along with the sales

learned to be frugal, ensuring profit margins were maximised at all times. Each of these factors would contribute to the subsequent success under the Corporation, particularly after the onset of the world steel crisis in 1975. With the rest of the industry haemorrhaging hundreds of millions of pounds, Bilston's flexible and conscientious steelmen were still able to maintain their proud profitable tradition.

The works' immediate post-war commercial success proved to be short-lived. Like so many of their domestic rivals, S&L suffered from falling demand and poor profitability prior to re-nationalisation. In January 1963, having witnessed a disastrous 40 per cent drop in sales, Stewart warned shareholders:

Capacity for steel production in this country, and indeed the rest of the free world, has reached a point at which it is in excess of demand and this position is likely to prevail over the next few years until increasing requirements restore the balance. In this interim period, therefore, the emphasis must be on reducing production costs and improving quality.⁴⁶

Unlike his more proactive predecessor, the hapless industrialist was reluctant to invest; instead distracting himself with a campaign against nationalisation. In March 1964, he took out a full-page advertisement in *The Times* describing public ownership as "old hat".⁴⁷ Two years later, with the Labour Party now in power, the S&L board launched an extraordinary attack on Harold Wilson's Government:

division, these highly trained steelmen would make regular visits to customers in order to discuss any problems or specific requirements.

⁴⁶ *The Times*, 11 January 1963.

⁴⁷ *The Times*, 12 March 1964.

Would a political know it all, irresponsible, juggling with dead statistics, teach us to do better in the long run? ... Now we have a Socialist Government committed to take into state ownership the major part of the Iron and Steel Industry. It is bound by the shackles of its past, lacking the courage or the judgement to corral its sacred cow. Its case for nationalisation is couched in emotional terms because it cannot be justified in any practical terms. That the Government should represent that it had a majority support in the country for any such measure is a disingenuous confidence trick upon the people.⁴⁸

In a desperate twelfth hour attempt to fend off state control, the BISF scrambled to release the 'Benson Report', which proposed to work closely with the state in order to rationalise domestic steelmaking units.⁴⁹ Joining the anti-nationalisation brigade was a considerable body of Bilston's workforce. One former worker reflects on the mood of the shop-floor on vesting day:

Some of the younger men were excited by the prospect of state ownership. They believed it would bring improved job security and higher wages ... But the vast majority of the workforce, particularly the old timers, had misgivings. S&L had been good to them ... They had created a family atmosphere at Bilston. Not only investing in plant and machinery, but people as well. These weren't

⁴⁸ *The Times*, 11 February 1965.

⁴⁹ BISF, *The Steel Industry: The Stage 1 Report of the Development coordinating Committee of the British Iron and Steel Federation* (London, 1966).

faceless corporations, but altruistic family firms. Nationalisation was a step into the unknown, so there were some reservations on the shop-floor.⁵⁰

As the above testimony reveals, the plant's traditionally conservative rank and file workforce enjoyed an *esprit de corps* with their private sector owners which, in turn, contributed to concerns over the prospect of nationalisation. Such diffidence was shared by their trade union leaders, many of whom preached the virtues of ideological conservatism.

The Trade Union Landscape of Steel

Like so many other industries, the craft exclusivity and provincial parochialism of new unionism created an obstacle to effective organisation amongst nineteenth and early twentieth century British iron and steelworkers. This would all change with the outbreak of WWI, after which David Lloyd George's coalition Government became concerned by the potential impact a multitude of organisations representing sectional interests might have on industrial relations and, therefore, supply lines. In 1917 the TUC General Council and Whitehall sought to rationalise an incredibly chaotic trade union landscape by persuading the many workers' organisations to merge under the banner of BISAKTA, a specially formed umbrella organisation commonly known as the ISTC.⁵¹ For domestic steelworkers, this would be a watershed moment. Decades of

⁵⁰ Oral testimony from anonymous, recorded 15 April 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

⁵¹ At the time of constitution, the ISTC saw the merger of organisations such as the British Steel Smelters, Mill Iron and Tinplate Union; The Associated Iron and Steel Workers of Great Britain and the National Steel Workers' Association Engineering and Labour League; the Amalgamated Association of Steel and Iron Workers of Great Britain; the Tin and Sheet Millmen's Association and the Wire Workers

geographical insularity and occupational sectionalism could finally be eradicated with the establishment of an all-powerful TUC-affiliated production union that could lobby Governments and employers on their behalf.

From the outset, the ISTC sought to widen its political influence, with President John Hodge selected as the nation's first Minister of Labour. As leader of the anti-socialist British Workers' National League, he was described by one Conservative Party peer as a "most patriotic Tory working man".⁵² Meanwhile, the Confederation's General Secretary, Arthur Pugh, was selected to lead the TUC, whilst also serving on the League of Nations' economic consultative committee and the editorial board of the *Daily Herald*. Following Pugh's retirement in 1935, his successor, John Brown, also became a permanent member of the General Council whilst, at the same time, sitting on various Government committees including the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, the industrial panel of the Finance Corporation for Industry and the Civil Service Commission.⁵³ With the Confederation's political authority and influence secure, Lincoln Evans was chosen to lead the powerful industrial union through the post-WWII period. Yet another conservative figure within the institutional labour movement, the Welshman sat on the NJAC, as well as the Economic Planning Committee and the General Council, where he and fellow right-wingers Arthur Deakin and Tom Williamson fought to block the spread of Marxism amongst Britain's unions. Evans also found infamy for assisting in the de-nationalisation of the industry, a stance that prompted Winston Churchill to award him a knighthood. After seven turbulent years in charge

Union. A glaring omission was the NUB which, by retaining its own identity, became the industry's second largest production union and a longstanding rival of the Confederation.

⁵² Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen, *Memories* (London, 1925), p. 207.

⁵³ TUC, *Report of the 1961 Annual TUC*, p. 289.

of the Confederation, he was replaced by the outspoken Harry Douglass, the Chair of the British Productivity Council. Then, on the eve of re-nationalisation, the aging Teessider stepped aside for another influential Welshman, David ‘Dai’ Davies, the former Treasurer and Chairman of the Labour Party.

Under the leadership of these establishment figures, the Confederation deservedly earned a reputation for conservatism: standing firmly – and proudly – on the right of the union movement; adopting a moderate, pro-establishment position that sought to work for the national interest. In the immediate aftermath of WWII, Pugh wrote:

Today the Trade Union Movement is a powerful instrument, but power brings responsibility. The assertion of ‘rights’ carries with it the obligation of duties, and the changes in the country’s economic life resulting from the exercise of that power, places upon the present generation of trade unionists the furtherance of a policy directed not to merely selfish ends but to the common good.⁵⁴

A further expression of its leadership’s temperance can be found in their attitude towards industrial action and, more significantly for this study, relations with management and lay members. In what John Vaizey has described as a “steel philosophy” and Peter Bowen a “pattern of interdependence”, ISTC officials adopted a patently pro-management position that sought to suppress any sign of industrial protest amongst their members.⁵⁵ During WWI, Hodge became an advocate of

⁵⁴ Pugh, *Men of Steel*, p. 591.

⁵⁵ Vaizey, *The History of*, p. 26; and Bowen, *Social Control*, p. 107.

patriotic labour, charging that industrial action was an act of treason, even threatening to prosecute striking Liverpudlian boilermakers under the Defence of the Realm Act. Although, with Pugh elected as President of the TUC, Confederation bureaucrats were compelled to support the 1926 General Strike, they did so with a great deal of remorse:

[It was] absolutely legally wrong, nay, it was a morally wrong ... It is no good mincing words; we made a grave breach of the traditions built up so slowly but surely during the past forty years, and there was no man more grieved than I was that we had discarded that tradition of arguing first.⁵⁶

Relations with the state and capital were further solidified under Evans, a General Secretary that frequently endorsed the adoption of policies that went against the interests of his own membership. In 1947, for example, his Executive threatened any Confederation man considering protesting a national weekend working agreement with permanent expulsion:

We believe in trade union discipline without which a trade union becomes a rabble. If membership has to be sacrificed in order to maintain it, better so, because if the rotten branch is not cut off the whole tree will become poisoned.⁵⁷

Upon his death, he was praised in *Man and Metal* for reinforcing his unions' post-war ideology:

⁵⁶ Hodge, *Workman's Cottage*, pp. 366-367.

⁵⁷ Pugh, *Men of Steel*, p. xiii.

He believed that without discipline a trade union becomes a rabble. He believed in the peaceful settlement of industrial differences, that strikes at best were an ugly and painful necessity and at worst were suicidal folly. Outworn shibboleths of a past age found no place in his philosophy and he spurned the cheap popularity often to be gained by repeating them. He preferred to face the facts and to advocate and pursue policies which his judgement and wide knowledge persuaded him were in the best interests of the men and women he served.⁵⁸

Davies was another loyal devotee to his predecessors' conservatism. Responding to a July 1972 strike request from one of Bilston's few militant shop stewards, he presented his union's longstanding position on radical industrial action:

Regarding your proposal that the Executive Council should, if necessary have a national strike to halt the growing number of sackings and closures, may I remind you that this could be a self-defeating exercise. There are in fact a number of plants whose future must be uncertain, and I should have thought that if the British Steel Corporation was forced to close these plants down, as would be inevitable in a national strike, then it would be very highly unlikely indeed that the plants concerned would ever re-open. This surely is hardly a result which your members would desire.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Man and Metal*, August 1970.

⁵⁹ Letter from D. Davies to D. Hamilton, 31 July 1972, MRC, MSS.36/2000/258. The Confederation's pro-management stance would continue after nationalisation, with a number of branch officials expelled for participating in unofficial strike action. See Upham, *Tempered*, p. 67.

A strict determination to uphold the sanctity of formal agreements, nonetheless, led to above average national pay for members and what has been described as, “a record of labour relations that, size for size, was hardly surpassed”.⁶⁰ But these achievements failed to appease members who repeatedly accused their leaders of authoritarianism.⁶¹ They were entirely accurate in their assessment, with Evans revealing the tight grip Swinton House held over its own rank and file:

It is not leadership which demands that the responsibility for making decisions must be thrown on the mass of men who have had no opportunity of hearing the case argued; it is an abdication of it. The readiness on the part of some leaders to justify referring a decision to the rank and file as an essential democratic process, finds its roots more often than otherwise, not in any passionate desire to observe some democratic principle but as a convenient means of escaping the responsibility for making a decision which calls for some degree of moral courage.⁶²

More recently, Hartley *et al.*, in their study of the 1980 steel strike, have highlighted the supreme power union headquarters wielded:

This system is one that in practice gives the General Secretary considerable power, for if he is able to generate support among a majority of the EC – which under normal circumstances is likely, given his greater experience and expert

⁶⁰ Bowen, *Social Control*, p. 18.

⁶¹ Unlike every other major industrial union, the ISTC stubbornly refused to organise an ADC or leadership election contests for lay members.

⁶² Pugh, *Men of Steel*, pp. xii-xiii.

power – he is unlikely to lose command as the result of a single year's election. Moreover, in addition to his administrative and executive responsibilities for the union machine the General Secretary has much discretion, crucially in his power to call Executive meetings and declare strikes.⁶³

In terms of development, ISTC leaders traditionally adopted a pro-modernising agenda, with Hodge publicly celebrating the mechanisation of the industry:

[We] never rebelled or placed any obstacle in the way of any automatic appliance being utilised, either in the melting furnace or in the rolling mills, my policy having been to advise the men not to work against the machine, but to make the greater possible use of it, provided we got a fair share of the plunder resulting from any new automatic or other appliances.⁶⁴

In his post-war history of the ISTC, Martin Upham described his organisation as, “a union in and of the steel industry, so committed to it that it co-operated with change whenever it was in the industry's interest, even when that meant painful experiences”.⁶⁵ This outlook led to charges that union headquarters was all too willing to sacrifice jobs for the promise of investment.

⁶³ J. Hartley, J.E. Kelly and N. Nicholson, *Steel Strike: A Case Study in Industrial Relations* (London, 1983), p. 29

⁶⁴ Hodge, *Workman's Cottage*, p. 90. One policy statement, published at the height of the Great Depression, proclaimed, “We recognise that in the process of adjusting an unorganised industry, displacement of labour must occur”. See *Man and Metal*, January 1973.

⁶⁵ Upham, *Tempered*, p. 72.

The Confederation inevitably developed a highly fractured relationship with fellow steel unions. In the post-war period, its leaders vigorously courted all grades of industrial worker, prompting the NUB to become suspicious of the ISTC's determination to absorb its members. Moreover, scholars have highlighted the problematic relationship that developed between industrial and craftworkers:

Relations between craft and production workers within the steel industry have always contained considerable elements of conflict. National and local officials of ISTC have often perceived craft workers as elitist, the craft side of the industry as 'overmanned', and the craft unions as politically ambitious within the industry (perceptions which were partly mirrored in craftworkers' views of the ISTC).⁶⁶

Relations with white-collar organisations were equally as hostile, with one management union official contending:

Having grown from its original strength among steel process-workers, ISTC then became the dominant steel union. However, it had many clashes with other unions. Such clashes partly mirrored its dictum that the steel industry should be left to the ISTC alone. ISTC has often been jealous of interventions by other unions.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Hartley *et al.*, *Steel Strike*, pp. 140-141.

⁶⁷ Bamber, *Militant Managers?*, p. 22.

When the industry was once again handed over to the state in July 1967, it continued to suffer from a disorderly trade union structure, with BSC employees at some plants attached to over two dozen different organisations. It was prevailing concerns over the fragmented union landscape and its potential impact on negotiation and conciliation that prompted the Government and the TUC to establish the Steel Committee. This formal body, which was completely independent of Congress House, was handed the responsibility of negotiating all non-wage matters on behalf of affiliated unions. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, the unification of these rival organisations did little to thwart internal conflict, and the TUCSICC was often rendered impotent in the face of closures.

Indeed, the longstanding historic traditions of the ISTC would have a direct impact on attitudes and, more importantly, policy during the period under review – proving H.A. Turner's submission that:

The character of organisations is very much the product of their ancestry ... British trade unions, more than those of most countries perhaps, are historical deposits and repositories of history.⁶⁸

A key factor in the rationalisation of the industry was, for example, the steel unions' ongoing determination to work in the national interest. The issue of union leaders becoming what Ralph Milliband referred to as "junior partners of capitalist enterprise", has been further outlined by Robert Taylor in *The Fifth Estate*.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ H.A. Turner, *Trade Union Growth, Structure and Policy* (London, 1962), p. 14.

⁶⁹ R. Milliband, *The State and Capitalist Society* (London, 1969), p. 161.

Unions can never afford to lose sight of what they are here for. 'Moderation' should not mean wage restraint, feeble bargaining, obedience to a mythical 'national' interest, which is part of the ritual language of British politics. The danger is not that unions will become instruments for 'extremist action' ... More serious, unions could lose their independence by finding themselves enmeshed in the machinery of the state as a partner, even a policeman, of government.⁷⁰

As organisations, "whose philosophy had been based upon the notion of constructive cooperation" with the Government and capital, the steel unions would continue to adopt a pro-management, pro-modernising philosophy under state ownership.⁷¹ In the words of one observer:

The unions had a tradition of co-operating with the employers to exert power over the workforce. This co-operation, combined with the union's control over jobs, subsequently helped BSC to rationalise the industry, without generally having to confront much concerted union opposition.⁷²

In the interim, nevertheless, the Confederation cemented its place as one of UK's largest unions, with its ranks swelling to 115,000 on the eve of nationalisation. Reporting to union headquarters at Swinton House on Gray's Inn Road, London was a 21-man Executive consisting of representatives from various geographical

⁷⁰ R. Taylor, *The Fifth Estate: Britain's Unions in the Seventies* (London, 1978), p. 123.

⁷¹ Bowen, *Social Control*, p. 134.

⁷² Bamber, *Militant Managers?*, p. 22.

divisions.⁷³ Each area had a small team of full-time officials, led by a Divisional Officer who liaised with his nominated EC member.⁷⁴ At plant-level, members were organised into branches representing a particular section of the works. Local officials included a Chairman and Secretary who were supported by a group of shop stewards or convenors.⁷⁵ At larger sites with multiple branches, there was typically a formal Joint Branches Committee, whose leadership would mediate with local management.

By July 1967 Bilston was home to approximately 2,500 Confederation members spread over half a dozen branches, the largest of which was ISTC Springvale No.1, representing the plant's melting shop workers. Other prominent Confederation branches included the finishing end (ISTC Springvale No.6) and a recently established Joint Staff Committee, representing a growing legion of white-collar employees. There were three other affiliated unions at the works. Around 200 blast furnace workers made up a solitary NUB lodge and another 150 men employed in the sprawling Transport Department were attached to the TGWU. The picture was completed by a handful of craftworkers, mainly bricklayers with UCATT.⁷⁶

The plant's trade union landscape was dominated by shop stewards known for their temperance and close relationship with management:

⁷³ For an outline of the ISTC's internal structure see Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, pp. 50-53.

⁷⁴ The Midlands were represented by Area No.4, with Divisional Officers based at a small office on the outskirts of Birmingham.

⁷⁵ The role of Chairman was often symbolic, typically being handed to the most senior shop steward. The Secretary was responsible for communicating with members and union headquarters, whilst a team of convenors handled day-to-day branch affairs.

⁷⁶ There were previously branches of the AUEW and the ETU at Bilston but the ISTC had aggressively absorbed their members.

That generation, you trusted bosses, if you like, to a certain extent ... they were above reproach.⁷⁷

The works newspaper featured a series of articles titled 'Know Your Union Man', which reveal the mindset and personal outlooks of many of the branch officials who went onto play an active role in the anti-closure campaign. What is particularly striking is interviewees' aversion to militant industrial action:

I am of the belief that strikes, pure and simple, cannot benefit except in extremis. Most bones of contention can only be satisfactorily ironed out by negotiation – striking at the drop of a hat only wastes time and frays tempers. In the end one has to talk around a table. Call me an idealist if you like. I am bound by the old traditions in that I am convinced that only by belonging to a union can employees get a fair deal but I also believe that we will only get that fair deal by bringing the union up-to-date. Common sense tells me that not all management are ogres; not all union men are St. George.⁷⁸

Another future BJUAC leader adopted a parallel position:

But do not go away with the idea that I am a rabid left-winger. I believe in the socialist ideal but in my view that does not mean I must be an extremist. I am a moderate. The trades unions must support the Government whether they like

⁷⁷ Oral testimony from G. Howe recorded 25 January 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

⁷⁸ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 31 October 1975.

it or not. We must realise that we have to knuckle down to it if we are to survive.

Strikes are no answer. In the end the negotiating table is the only solution.⁷⁹

Beyond this conservative vanguard, Bilston's wider workforce exhibited a low level of trade union consciousness, with one senior shop steward bemoaning widespread apathy, "Half a dozen members, no matter how staunch, should not make decisions for 145. I would like to see members take union matters a little more seriously".⁸⁰

Another complained:

Our greatest problem is in getting all our members together for union meetings.

And, unfortunately, because we are so widespread, there is a marked degree of apathy amongst our people.⁸¹

Such indifference was a direct consequence of the traditionally close working relationship that had developed between local management and the workforce under private ownership. A critical factor in shaping a uniquely peaceful industrial relations culture was the personnel and social policies introduced by two exceptionally altruistic and paternalistic family firms.

⁷⁹ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Works Edition*, 18 July 1975.

⁸⁰ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Works Edition*, 29 August 1975.

⁸¹ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 14 November 1975.

Uncertain Loyalty: unionism at Bilston in historical perspective

The retraction of the pig iron trade throughout the second half of the nineteenth century coincided with a series of major labour conflicts. These disputes, often provoked by attacks on wages, were customarily organised by informal combinations of ill-disciplined men who, despite plenty of endeavour, were easily subjugated by an especially ruthless breed of local ironmaster. A major turning point came in April 1863, when a region-wide protest pre-empted the emergence of a small band of labour leaders who would go on to establish the very first generation of formal workers' organisations.⁸² Under their supervision, workers furiously lobbied for formal conciliation and arbitration apparatus, culminating in the establishment of one of the UK's first wages board in July 1872. In a unique experiment that would dramatically alter the direction of the industry's nascent industrial relations culture, a sliding scale was introduced and, when a local disagreement occurred, democratically elected trade union officials were given the opportunity to sit down with the masters to mutually discuss a new pay deal.⁸³ After years of crippling disputes, both sides finally appeared willing to reconcile their many differences. Moreover, the democratic nature of the wages board indicated that the area's steelworkers, who had developed a reputation for ill-discipline, were ready to respect the authority of their union leaders. Their

⁸² The dispute saw the successful adoption of a multi-works rolling strike strategy, briefly convincing local ironworkers of the potential benefits of collective action. Victory for the masters prompted the men to form the Associated Ironworkers of Great Britain, one of the first formal unions in the region. For a detailed and empirically weighted account of the origins and early development of the iron and steel unions in the Black Country see either Taylor, *Working Class Movement*; or Howard, *Strikes and Lockouts*.

⁸³ Barnsby has described the establishment of the board as an early example of an "alliance philosophy". See Barnsby, *Social Conditions*, p. 78.

loyalty, however, would soon waver, as many continued to unilaterally negotiate separate pay deals with their employers. With the board rendered impotent, local workers were lambasted by their Northern counterparts:

We cannot say more than that the ironworkers of the South were never placed in a more pitiable position than they are present. In the mass they have proved treacherous and unreliable on union matters with eagerness to rob each other or the breaking up of lodges, which is truly deplorable: and after they had made themselves the laughing stock of intelligent men, have completed the work of folly by standing before the trade as traitors to the union and mere talkers about conciliation, and after three years' experience the life of this somewhat noisy infant has ceased to exist.⁸⁴

In 1887 a new nationwide organisation was established under the guise of the AISWGB, but formal combination continued to be an alien concept to Black Country ironworkers. With the union failing to get a foothold in the area, its leadership was forced to issue a circular criticising their Midland members:

If the Wages Board is to be dissolved or is to be made a power for good instead of evil, it can never be done by disorganised workmen. "Only complete organisation can either make the Wages Board an instrument of justice or replace it with some other method which shall secure the legitimate rights of the worker. Whether these rights shall be secured rests entirely with the non-union men. Disorganised, disbanded workmen can do nothing – but slide

⁸⁴ Pugh, *Men of Steel*, p. 53.

downwards! Evils exist which demand immediate attention. Conditions are imposed which ought not to be tolerated for a day, yet the board is powerless to act because the representatives have no body of support behind them, and even the employers' section fear to enforce adherence to its rules because of giving offence to those employers who simply look upon the board as a convenience for imposing unjust conditions upon their workmen".⁸⁵

Nevertheless, a growing number of the region's steelworkers belatedly adopted the banner of trade unionism in the first decade of the twentieth century, before joining *en masse* after WWI.

But there was one notable exception. Steelmen employed at Bilston continued to display a lukewarm attitude to formal combination. Both the Hickmans and S&L were known for adopting a more sophisticated approach to man-management than their contemporaries, introducing a series of innovative welfare and personnel policies across their respective stewardships. The result of this altruistic paternalism was to establish an informal social contract between the manager-owners and their loyal employees; engineering a positive plantwide industrial relations culture.

After purchasing the facility in 1866, Alfred Hickman proved to be an extremely compassionate employer, taking an active interest in the welfare of a workforce that had suffered greatly at the hands of previous proprietor John Sparrow. The infamous ironmaster was part of a generation of unscrupulous industrialists who had emerged as the pig iron industry began to retrench. Adopting a highly patriarchal and

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

authoritarian attitude, their behaviour was exposed by one of the Bilston's church leaders in his controversial sermon, 'On the Sins of the Iron Trade':

The iron trade – I speak to those who know the trade well, to those who are smarting the shameless dealings which have recently characterised it – the iron trade is replete with such men. Men, did I say? Forgive me the expression, brethren, I wrong humanity – they are mushrooms, rather, rotting, and yet ripening on their own rottenness; soap bubbles: glittering in the sunshine of their prosperity with the most gaudy colours, swelling all the time larger and larger, yet full only of emptiness: till ever and anon they 'break' and burst, and leave only a spot of filthiness – and half-a-crown in the pound – behind.⁸⁶

As their empires began to crumble around them, Bilston's remaining independent ironmasters became even more determined to violently suppress any sign of protest. Industrial actions were punished under the Masters and Servants Acts, with George Barnsby establishing that Wolverhampton had the highest prosecution rate in the UK.⁸⁷

Aware of the damaging impact such behaviour could have on overall performance, Hickman sought to foster closer industrial relations by bucking the trend established by his more combative peers. Concerned by his men's personal wellbeing, he took an interest in accident prevention, providing furnace-hands with breathing apparatus

⁸⁶ Rev. C. Lee, A Sermon to Ironmasters, Merchants and Others on the Sins of the Iron Trade, WCA, LS/LB8p.

⁸⁷ Barnsby, *Social Conditions*, p. 46.

designed to prevent respiratory diseases. He also financed an independent study into the prevention of workplace accidents, leading to an industrywide initiative requiring all boiler units to possess a formal safety certificate. In the event of a work-related accident, Alfred installed a state-of-the-art medical centre that housed fully trained nursing staff, whilst introducing a generous compensation scheme for injured or sick employees and their family members. He was also one of the first ironmasters to advocate the eight-hour day. For those unlucky enough to be working on Christmas day, the Hickman family personally provided a turkey dinner and a healthy supply of beer. Such was his standing amongst the men, he was affectionately handed the moniker of 'Little Alfie':

*We now come to little Alfie Hickman,
Who to square at his foes is a quick man,
His true English pluck shall better the luck
Of puddler, and roller, and pickman!*⁸⁸

Hickman's concern for the common man eventually transcended the confines of his works. From his modest manor house on the outskirts of Bilston, he and his wife administered a wide range of philanthropic activities. Receiving a knighthood in 1891, Sir Alfred used his new national platform to mount a successful run on Parliament. Throughout his political career, the popular ironmaster became a leading advocate for legislation designed to improve the lives of industrial workers and their dependents.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ "Little Alfie" election handbill, WCA, DX-634/134.

⁸⁹ Hickman backed the Conciliation Act, the Coal Mines Regulation Act, the Truck Act, the Employer's Liability Act and the Workmen's Compensation Acts. He was also a vocal supporter of the unsuccessful

His Parliamentary support for the Workmen's Dwellings Acquisition Bill of 1896, for example, revealed a social conscience rarely exhibited by a captain of industry, "It was a disgrace to the civilisation of the country that a large portion of the working classes should be housed worse than were horses and dogs, and in some cases even worse than pigs".⁹⁰

Upon leaving Westminster, *The Iron Trade Review* praised him for improving the lives of his constituents, many of whom were his employees. In honour of the contribution he had made to the economic and social well-being of the local community, a public fund was organised, culminating with the presentation of a commemorative gift inscribed with the words, "He sits high in all the people's hearts".⁹¹ At a civic banquet held in his honour, the master of ceremonies provided an insight into the relationship Hickman had with the townsfolk:

The 4,226 subscribers to the gift now offered you represent all social grades of our local community, but the fact that the large majority of them belong to the working class will, we think, be particularly pleasing to you as showing that in their opinion you have allowed no class prejudices to influence you in the consideration and support you have always given to the just and reasonable claims of labour.⁹²

Prevention of Accidents Bill, the Child Messenger's Bill and a scheme banning boys less than fourteen years of age working in mines.

⁹⁰ 38 Parl. Deb. H.C. (4th ser.) (1896) col. 131.

⁹¹ *The Iron Trade Review*, 21 February 1907.

⁹² *The Iron Trade Review*, 6 February 1908.

The man now known as the Iron King of South Staffordshire died only three years later. His funeral was an extraordinary demonstration of reverence, with thousands of mourners joining a three-mile procession behind his casket.⁹³ Any prevailing concerns that the munificent owner's death might signal the end of his progressive management style were, nevertheless, quickly pacified. Edward Hickman not only inherited commercial and technical nous from his father, but also his benevolent nature, with the young operator establishing an even more far-reaching personnel programme. A full-time Welfare Officer was recruited to oversee and administer sick benefits, and a new system of grants introduced to cover the funeral costs of all current and past employees.⁹⁴ With his workforce growing and prosperity returning to the industry, Edward personally oversaw the construction of a workers' institute that contained a 24-hour licensed canteen, a swimming pool and showers.⁹⁵ He also organised daytrips for workers and more needy members of the local community. His most popular policy was to provide a free daily beer allowance to employees struggling with the intensity of hot metal production, a tradition that continued under BSC. He was also keenly aware of the importance of opening channels of communication with employees and, in June 1919, launched a works newspaper.

The centrepiece of his personnel policy was, however, an innovative initiative that represented one of the earliest examples of worker participation and class collaboration within the domestic steel trade. Employees were invited to purchase a stake in the business via a preferential share issue, with 50,000 shares offered to

⁹³ *The Iron Trade Review*, 31 March 1910.

⁹⁴ *The Steel Times*, November 1965.

⁹⁵ *The Ingot*, July 1919.

production workers under a PAYE plan. Each share could be purchased with an affordable down payment and the balance deducted from wages over an agreed period. When trade was booming, a dividend of 6.5 per cent was guaranteed and any surplus profit shared equally between both preference and ordinary shareholders. Dividends were protected for employees and, if the company's profits proved insufficient, a guaranteed payment would still be made.

In what was a unique experiment in industrial democracy, Hickman invited major worker shareholders to join his company's board:

We do not want the money. What we want is your cooperation in the conduct of our business. We want every man and every woman who is employed here in any capacity whatever to have, in his and her heart and mind, the benefit of the whole concern ... We want you to help us, and by helping us help yourselves, to make a larger dividend than we have done in the past.⁹⁶

Although the enlightened approach adopted by the paternalistic Hickman family was principally motivated by a genuine concern for the well-being of their workforce, there was an ulterior motive. The pragmatic ironmasters introduced a uniquely progressive management style in a deliberate move to temper any potential shop-floor discord. Likewise, as the second half of the nineteenth century progressed, Alfred sought to forestall the spread of trade unionism. As a titan of industry and a devoted Tory, the values of collective action and outside arbitration were contrary to his view of the established relationship between capital and labour. When political campaigning, he

⁹⁶ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 6 July 1978.

had had a public spat with the leaders of the WB&DTUC, who raised doubts over the sincerity of his benevolence:

I must admit that my unswerving faith in Mr. Hickman's professions of disinterested solicitude and love for the working man received a final blow ... and I say perish Conservatism if it has to be bolstered up by a system which means the lowering of wages and the degradation of the working man.⁹⁷

Alfred's relationship with the trade union movement continued to be strained. Some years later, he declared that anyone supporting a national coal strike were the, "worst enemy" of the men.⁹⁸ Although incredibly rare, whenever industrial action did occur at the works, the Hickman family would seek to undermine organisers by inviting the families of striking employees to the works canteen for free hot meals.

The strategy proved extremely effective, with the company enjoying a uniquely harmonious industrial relations record under their stewardship.⁹⁹ Moreover, it achieved its objective of precluding the spread of trade unionism. In June 1884, the South Staffordshire Millmen's Association was established in Bilston but, with little interest from the plant's employees, the union soon folded. The first trade union branch at Hickman's, representing the Steel Smelters and Iron and Steelworkers, wasn't established until 1911, long after Alfred had died. The next year, the TGWU

⁹⁷ *The Express and Star*, 21 November 1885.

⁹⁸ *The Iron Trade Review*, 24 August 1905.

⁹⁹ Disputes were customarily resolved at plant level and the relationship between the Hickman family and the men remained incredibly close across their stewardship.

secured a foothold, before being joined by the ISTC in 1921. However, these powerful organisations struggled to attract significant numbers until after the Great Depression.

S&L thereby built on the model of mutual cooperation laid down by their popular predecessors. As the depression took hold, Allan MacDiarmid demonstrated a socially conscientious approach by signing loss-making contracts to avoid short time working and compulsory redundancies, whilst persuading his directors to accept a pay cut.¹⁰⁰ This and other gestures ensured a “loyal and harmonious relationship” continued to exist throughout the interwar years, with MacDiarmid publicly thanking the men for their “able and painstaking work”.¹⁰¹ As prosperity returned to the trade, S&L introduced a holiday pay scheme long before Neville Chamberlain’s National Government had passed their much lauded Holidays with Pay Act. Then, on the eve of WWII, MacDiarmid contributed £90,000 of his own personal wealth to a company Employee’s Benefit Fund, whilst fellow directors agreed to make a regular annual donation of £70,000.¹⁰²

S&L also focused on welfare provision, with its Labour Committee sanctioning a brand-new social centre and recreational complex at Bilston.¹⁰³ Often referred to as the ‘club’, this sprawling facility would become the cultural hub of the works; a place where workmates could escape the toil of hot metal production:

¹⁰⁰ *The Times*, 28 March 1924.

¹⁰¹ *The Times*, 13 May 1936.

¹⁰² *The Times*, 17 May 1940.

¹⁰³ As a sign of their appreciation, the men made a voluntary contribution to the cost of furnishing the social centre. In return, S&L handed them the deeds. For an account of the company’s overall personnel and welfare policy at Corby, see Scopes, *Development of Corby*, pp. 110-118.

We did, yeah. I very rarely used it at night, but at lunchtimes, yes, because there was so much to do. I mean, you'd got rifle shooting, they'd [got] a rifle range. When I first went there, there was a swimming baths, a heated swimming baths, heated by the blast furnace. And it got quite warm in there sometimes! ... it was a beautiful swimming pool when I first started. So there was a lot to do.¹⁰⁴

I was quiet when I first started but I got to know a few buddies and we started hanging around together. It was nice to be able to go down to the social centre of a dinner time, have a sandwich, play a game of snooker when we could get on! Obviously, the guys who had been there a lot longer than us dominated the tables ... It was a great place for camaraderie. Every Friday, because we got paid cash in hand – your money would be in a little brown packet which you fetched from the wage's office ... You'd go to the social centre and have your coke; it wasn't beer because they wouldn't let us have one ... But there was some great guys there. A guy called Bowell, and guy called Rozzle ... we looked up to these people because they were what we wanted to be. I didn't know what they did like, but I just wanted to be part of it ... I have some great memories of that social centre. As I became one of the operational guys and all that, we spent a lot more time there. We'd go down at night, for Christmas parties and there'd be big bands on there; we'd play cricket and football, snooker, it was fantastic. The good thing about it was, all the guys were there, and you had a *cracke* with them, you know!?¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, p. 18.

¹⁰⁵ Oral testimony from P. Winmill recorded 16 March 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

The company's benevolence would continue after MacDiarmid's untimely death in 1945. As part of A.G. Stewart's aforementioned post-war redevelopment scheme, the company installed a state-of-the-art training centre that provided accredited apprenticeships and City & Guild qualifications to young Bilstonians.¹⁰⁶ In the decades before nationalisation, a Works Council was established. Composed of democratically elected manual workers rather than shop stewards, this formal body worked alongside management to tackle all non-wage issues such as personnel, welfare, health and safety and productivity. Moreover, as a managerial instrument for promoting shop-floor cooperation and harmony, the Works Council successfully diluted any signs of post-war shop-floor militancy.¹⁰⁷

Like the Hickmans, anti-union S&L bosses had deliberately fostered a bilateral relationship centred on the value of reciprocity and mutual interest. As ownership passed into the hands of the state, the wider workforce possessed an extremely low level of trade union consciousness. There was, however, a tradition of senior shop stewards participating in the civic and political life of the local community, a precedent that would have a significant impact on the direction of the subsequent defence campaign.

¹⁰⁶ Bilston's steelmen were incredibly attached to the training centre, with many serving apprenticeships there. The facility also provided a vital community function, offering training workshops to local school leavers.

¹⁰⁷ In 1956, when the rest of the UK steel industry was experiencing a damaging national craftworker dispute, the Works Council persuaded local trade unionists to ignore direct calls from national leaders to withdraw their labour.

The Politics of Steel at Bilston

From the very outset, the ISTC concentrated considerable resources on obtaining political influence through Parliamentary representation, strategically sponsoring Labour Party candidates in traditional steel communities. At Bilston, a small group of steelmen, led by Councillor Tommy Marks, met in early 1921. After forming the plant's first Confederation branch, they looked to establish direct links between union headquarters and the Bilston CLP. Shop stewards subsequently persuaded local party officials to nominate John Baker, their Assistant General Secretary, as the preferred candidate for the November 1922 general election.¹⁰⁸ Although the Yorkshireman narrowly lost the contest, the nature of his defeat convinced his organisation's ambitious Parliamentary Panel to support another bid at the October 1924 contest. To improve his chances of victory, the Confederation employed legendary political agent Sam Hague to manage the campaign. The trade union leader was subsequently elected as Bilston's inaugural Labour Party MP, defeating war hero and famed Everest explorer Charles Howard-Bury.

Known locally as the 'men of steel', Baker and Hague proved an impressive and exceptionally popular double act, described by one regional commentator as "pioneers of the trade union and political movement".¹⁰⁹ With the latter taking a seat on Bilston Council, they worked alongside shop stewards to set about transforming the town's

¹⁰⁸ Baker was co-founder of the National Amalgamated Society of Enginemen, Cranemen, Boilermen, Firemen and Electrical Works and a founding father of the Confederation. For a biographical account of Baker, see Pugh, *Men of Steel*, pp. 22-30.

¹⁰⁹ J. Smallshire, *Pioneering in Black Country Local Governments, 1850-1950* (Wolverhampton, 1986), p. 96.

CLP into one of the largest in the West Midlands. A new Labour Club with offices and function rooms became a hive of community and political activism. To maintain its organising strength, Baker and Hague ensured that party officials continued to enjoy a close working relationship with ISTC convenors at the steelworks, a tradition that would continue over the next half century. Baker was eventually unseated at the October 1931 general election, with Hague also leaving the Black Country a short time later. The two ISTC men had, nevertheless, made their mark, vastly strengthening the influence of the Bilston CLP and the WB&DTUC.

The man chosen to contest the November 1935 election was Welshman David Llewellyn Mort, another Confederation-sponsored candidate and EC member. Despite only spending a brief period in the Black Country, the former steelworker helped consolidate the organising work previously undertaken by his fraternal brothers. Local trade union officials developed personal links with radical socialist firebrands such as Benjamin Bilboe, an UWM organiser who became the poster boy for the region's unemployed movement. With joblessness amongst Black Country steelworkers reaching a staggering 64 per cent, Bilboe invited Fenner Brockway to Bilston.¹¹⁰ In *Hungry England*, the influential social commentator described a community on the edge:

In Bilston I get the impression of a district devastated by war. There are large waste stretches pocked with holes and ridges just as though they had suffered a heavy bombardment. There are large patches of weeds and grass growing thinly over cinders. There are large patches of cinders with no grass at all.

¹¹⁰ Barnsby, *Socialism*, p. 535.

There are houses in ruins, with bricks scattered in confusion. There are houses with cracked walls and roofs, only prevented from falling by wooden beams propped against them. So looked the towns of Flanders before they were repaired ... We cross one of the waste patches, with those crude holes and ridges of cinders and weeds. I find the explanation is devastation of peace, not of war. 'The site of a devastated steel-works,' says my friend. 'The machinery sold as scrap iron, the bricks – what haven't been left about [he kicks one] – sold to some jerry builder'. There are still huge steel works standing, but I notice that smoke comes from the chimneys of only a few. 'Closed down,' says my friend.¹¹¹

As the crisis deepened, Bilboe and his supporters launched an attack on the middle-class 'do-gooders' running Bilston Council, pooling their meagre resources with local communists to contest a series of elections. With the campaign reaching fever pitch in November 1933, the so-called 'champion of the poor' was arrested whilst protesting a state-sponsored works scheme reviled for paying below recommended union wage rates. Bilboe, who was famously elected as a Councillor whilst sitting in a local gaol, eventually agreed to swap his allegiances and join the Labour Party. With Mort departing the area, Bilboe was elected as Mayor, whilst the plant's shop stewards continued to actively participate in community politics.¹¹²

¹¹¹ F. Brockway, *Hungry England* (London, 1932), pp. 41-43.

¹¹² Two such individuals were Thomas Cornes and Walter Fellows who, after joining a Labour Party summer school established by Mort and Bilboe, went on to serve as Councillors, with the latter eventually emulating his mentor by becoming Mayor.

The legacy of these men of steel would have a major impact on the defence campaign waged decades later. By determining a socialist tradition within the local Labour Party apparatus, they helped usher in the election of ILP leader and trade unionist Bob Edwards as MP for Bilston in May 1955. As this thesis will reveal, the Liverpudlian would become a key political ally and strategist for the action committee. Moreover, they inspired a new generation of Bilstonians to engage in trade union and community politics. This included Dennis Turner, a young steelman who would work alongside Edwards to defend the plant throughout the 1970s.

Conclusion

The scope of this chapter has been deliberately broad, providing historical context to the campaign to save Bilston throughout the 1970s. The first half concentrated on the industrial heritage of iron and steel, chronicling the development and commercial performance of Bilston works between 1866 and nationalisation a century later. Of great significance, certainly for this thesis, was the ability of its highly skilled and industrious workforce to adapt and flourish during the industry's many cyclical downturns. This, it is later determined, greatly contributed to Bilston consistency posting a profit during the subsequent world steel crisis. Another crucial factor was a post-war reconstruction project which, by retaining hot metal practices, forced down production costs. However, paradoxically, these same investment decisions also sounded the death knell of the facility a quarter century later.

The second half of the chapter specifically traced the evolution of steel's trade union landscape. In 1917, following decades of disruption caused by provincial parochialism

and sectionalism, order was restored with the state-sponsored creation of the ISTC, the industry's largest and most powerful production union. Across its history, this politically influential organisation earned a reputation for institutional conservatism, customarily developing a close relationship with management whilst adopting a strict modernising agenda. The union leadership's longstanding willingness to sacrifice vast numbers of members in exchange for investment in new technology is key to this thesis, as it set the tone for future behaviour. As did the ISTC's relationship with its rival steel unions. Despite the Government's intervention in 1917, the industry continued to suffer from a chaotic trade union landscape, with over two dozen different organisations represented at the twenty-one fully-integrated iron and steelworks absorbed into the Corporation in July 1967. Indeed, of crucial importance to our story was the traditionally fractured nature of inter-union relations which, it is later argued, would prohibit any coordinated pan-organisation response to closures during the crisis.

The chapter has charted the development of the industrial relations culture of Bilston works. By adopting a progressive personnel and welfare policy, its paternalistic owner-managers successfully installed an *esprit de corps* with a moderate workforce who thereby displayed a longstanding aversion to collective action and self-organisation. The men's trade union leaders, nonetheless, developed a tradition of participating in civil society and the political life of the town. Decades later, shop stewards associated with Bilston CLP would spearhead local resistance alongside their elected officials.

The next chapter begins by documenting the experiences of local steelworkers during the formative years of the Corporation. As many of their colleagues basked in the warm glow of public ownership, Bilston's employees were systematically marginalised by an explicitly biased management team seeking to safeguard those more modern facilities inherited in July 1967. This process of managed decline would culminate in the Ten Year Strategy, a Government-backed modernisation programme that sanctioned the closure of older inland facilities such as Bilston. Local responses to these events are investigated in the second half of the chapter.

Chapter 3: The Managed Decline of Bilston Steelworks

This chapter documents the experiences of Bilston's steelworkers during the first six years under public ownership. It demonstrates how nationalisation originally brought a renewed sense of optimism to UK steelmen who benefitted from an array of progressive personnel policies introduced by socially conscientious senior industry and Whitehall officials. All this would change with the June 1970 election of Edward Heath, with the Conservative Party determined to clip the wings of an underperforming 'lame duck' public sector industry. It examines the new Government's treatment of state steel and the negative impact its intrusive industrial strategy had on the Corporation and its employees. Following an assessment of management's 'bigger is better' approach to development, which was sanctioned by Whitehall, it sheds light on how planners systematically marginalised Bilston works whilst excluding the facility from their new modernising agenda.

The chapter critically reviews the preliminary responses of the steel unions to workplace restructuring which, in a foreshadowing of what was to occur throughout the remainder of the decade, was lacking. It is established that these pro-establishment institutions consented to management prerogative in regard to development policymaking. The failure of union leaders in London to protect threatened plants prompted members to organise themselves into local grassroots pressure groups. These so-called WACs mounted the first serious instances of mobilised resistance to rationalisation without the assistance of their ambivalent national leaderships. The chapter concludes with an account of the origins and early tactics adopted by Bilston's steelmen in their bid to stave-off rationalisation and eventual closure.

BSC: The Early Years

As custodians of a publicly owned enterprise, the first generation of senior Corporation officials sought to build a positive relationship with employees and their unions. Chairman Lord Julian Mond Melchett was particularly eager to adhere to the social principles of the Iron and Steel Act and, in August 1967, his First Report on Organisation promised, the “socially responsible utilisation of human resources”.¹ Guided by a reformist Labour Government, BSC went above and beyond these obligations, becoming an “exemplar of social and industrial policy”.²

With Melchett’s backing, Director for Personnel, Ron Smith, quickly set about improving conditions of employment. In the area of pay, the former UPW leader successfully negotiated wage deals with each of the steel unions. Production workers benefitted greatly, with substantial pay hikes handed to ISTC and NUB members. The average weekly earnings of public sector blast furnacemen, for example, rose by 22 per cent – compared with an average national increase of 17.4 per cent for UK industrial workers.³ Additional settlements covering non-wage elements meant shorter hours, longer and better paid holidays, improved sickness benefits and a generous pension scheme. In terms of health and safety, the dynamic Smith

¹ BSC, *Report on Organisation*, HMSO Cmnd. 3362, August 1967. Lord Julian Melchett, a merchant banker and Tory life peer, was a surprise choice by the Labour Government. A tenacious yet sympathetic character, he subsequently earned the respect of his employees, their unions and Whitehall for his enlightened approach.

² M. Upham, ‘Passages on the Path to Privatisation: The Experience of British Steel’, *IRJ*, 21.2 (1990), p. 87.

³ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 3 June 1971.

introduced a quarterly journal, a charter to prevent accidents at the pre-injury stage and a JWP with the TUCSICC called JAPAC. He also oversaw the formation of an Education and Training Advisory Committee, which provided career development pathways to all employees. At Bilston, the cherished training centre was upgraded, thus ensuring the proud tradition of on-site education continued to flourish:⁴

They were great on training; they had a proper set-up where you were shown what the steelworks were all about. They had their own cinema there. It was fantastic, they'd show you films ... on Bilston, on Elisabeth, the reason she made so much noise ... They did first aid there; I've still got my first aid certificate. They did a full training package where they tried to build you up into men. Because I was only a boy, you know ... The apprenticeships were fantastic, what they were selling to us, there were various kinds. You could go into the electrical side, the mechanical side and there was also a joint one. There was also the office side, where you could go into wages ... We had lots of trips as well. We went to Coombs Wood, to see how that operates, that was up in Blackheath way. We went to Hosier Beds and watched how they drew the steel by hand, wow, amazing mate, absolutely amazing! And then from Hosier Beds we went to Weldless Steel, just up the road from where we live now and watched the mandrills. So, they made sure we understood the

⁴ In March 1970 a record 98 employees received a City and Guilds in Iron and Steel Operative or Technician courses, whilst a further nine were awarded a certificate in Supervisory Studies from the National Examination Board. Four more earned a degree from Wolverhampton Polytechnic. See *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, March 1970.

industry we were working in; it was really fantastic the way they led us into the industry.⁵

It was, however, in the area of participation and joint consultation that Smith was most active. One of his first measures was a worker-director scheme designed to forge closer links between the shop-floor and management.⁶ Grosvenor Place placed great emphasis on the need for a “good system of internal communication” and a “decentralised approach to human relations”, which Smith asserted, could not thrive in an “atmosphere of remoteness and isolation”.⁷ He, therefore, launched a free monthly newspaper, whilst establishing sectional JCCs at plant-level. The introduction of these and other measures prompted Elizabeth Cottrell to describe the Corporation as a “pioneer in employee participation”.⁸ Peter Brannen and his University of Warwick colleagues reflect on the mindset of senior industry officials during this early period:

In the words of the then chairman of the Steel Corporation: ‘It was essential to let some people in this mammoth set-up feel they had some influence in the way its policies and future were shaped. We had little hope of carrying through nationalisation unless we could get a spirit of genuine involvement’. The corporation set out as a matter of policy to achieve this involvement through the introduction of comprehensive consultation machinery, the expansion of collective bargaining and the appointment of worker directors to group boards.⁹

⁵ Oral testimony from P. Winmill recorded 16 March 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

⁶ For two accounts of BSC’s worker director scheme, see Brannen *et al.*, *The Worker Directors*; and J. Bank and K. Jones, *Worker Directors Speak* (Aldershot, 1977).

⁷ *The Steel News: Northern and Tubes Group Edition*, April 1968.

⁸ Cottrell, *The Giant*, p. 13.

⁹ Brannen *et al.*, *The Worker Directors*, p. 4.

BSC's social functions were extended to its prospective rationalisation and closure programme. One condition agreed with Congress House was that no major final restructuring decision would be sanctioned until senior industry officials had consulted – and negotiated with – workers and their representatives. If the proposals affected 100 or more men, it was management policy to ensure that no redundancies would be made for at least six months after closure was ratified. In the case of a fully-integrated works, this could be extended for up to three years. In the interim, the men and their trade unions would be given every opportunity to sway management thinking via their own in-house counter-proposals.¹⁰ Moreover, Smith offered cast-iron guarantees that any such development schemes would be appraised with an open mind.

In the event of a final permanent closure decision, BSC's Social Policy Division was tasked with the responsibility of cushioning the human cost of rationalisation. The Department was led by former Labour Government Minister Kenneth Robinson who, upon assuming the role, outlined his intentions to *The Steel News*:

I see my task as one of ensuring that any works closure, or run-down, is carried through with the least possible hardship to individuals or damage to communities. I recognise that some degree of hardship is inevitable in this kind of situation, but I believe that the Corporation, through the social policy function, is determined to do everything that an enlightened employer can be expected

¹⁰ If the men failed to provide a convincing alternative to closure, the second period of three months would be given as a final formal notice. See BSC, *Annual Report and Accounts 1967/8* (London, 1968), p. 30.

to do, and to ensure that modernisation and rationalisation humanely carried out.¹¹

Like Melchett and Smith, Robinson was a bureaucrat with a soul. Under his watch the Corporation negotiated an Employment and Incomes Security Agreement with Congress House, providing an additional cushion from industrial change. If, after the aforementioned consultation process, a unit was indeed to shut, Robinson's Department would seek to redeploy interested parties elsewhere.¹² Otherwise, management actively worked alongside state agencies to attract alternative industry and employment to rationalised steel communities.¹³ Meanwhile, all outgoing employees would receive a guaranteed redundancy payment 25 per cent above the rate provided by the Government's August 1965 Redundancy Payments Act.

Irrespective of these measures, between 1967 and 1971, streamlining occurred at a deliberately measured pace.¹⁴ Rundown schemes were secured, for the most part, with the compliance of the unions and affected members, the majority of whom were able to reconcile closures with BSC's social policy measures. Robinson was particularly successful at redeployment, with approximately 40 per cent of affected

¹¹ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 1 April 1971.

¹² In such an instance, the Corporation would cover any additional travel or household expense incurred by relocation, whilst guaranteeing a five-shift weekly rota with a minimum wage of 80 per cent of previous earnings under the GWW.

¹³ The scheme centred on joint ventures with regional planning authorities, Councils and private enterprise to build new industrial units on former Corporation land.

¹⁴ In the first year of operation, for example, the Corporation shut only a handful of minor plants or mills-only facilities at cost of 2,200 jobs. See BSC, *Annual Report and Accounts 1967/8* (London, 1988), p. 30.

employees accepting roles elsewhere in the organisation.¹⁵ For the remainder, the impact of unemployment was alleviated by substantial compensation packages and the apparent success of management's new job-creation programme. With the economy booming, formal partnerships were established with local authorities and the private sector. After the running down of the Renishaw and Park Gate, for example, BSC entered into a £7m industrial development project with John Finland, attracting 4,000 new jobs to Sheffield and Manchester. On Teesside, Robinson signed a deal with Swan Hunter to retrain redundant steelworkers as shipbuilders.

Meanwhile, on the commercial front, the Corporation enjoyed a period of high demand between 1968 and 1970.¹⁶ Witnessing his workforce smash all pre-nationalisation production records, a delighted Melchett announced:

Great credit is due to all those who have helped to achieve this record. Tremendous effort has been made by management and the workforce throughout BSC to overcome very great operational difficulties during the last few months. In producing tonnages of this magnitude, the British steel industry has done more than break records – it has demonstrated its great potential.¹⁷

¹⁵ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 1 April 1971. When a melting shop at BSC's Brymbo works was closed, 103 of the 129 affected men were redeployed. At Scunthorpe, with the cessation of steelmaking and rolling at Appleby-Frodingham, only 37 men were declared redundant out of the 1,300 employed at the original facility. See *Man and Metal*, July 1974.

¹⁶ In 1967/8 BSC produced 22.9m t/p/a, beating forecasts by 6.25 per cent. Output subsequently climbed to 24.2m t/p/a the following year. In 1970/1 this figure reached 24.7m. See BSC, *Annual Report and Accounts 1970-71* (London, 1971), p. x.

¹⁷ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 19 November 1970.

Increased sales, however, did not translate into profitability. In the face of a buoyant seller's market, financial returns were underwhelming, with the Corporation posting losses of £19m and £23m in 1967/8 and 1968/9 respectively.¹⁸ Although Grosvenor Place finally registered a profit of £12m in 1969/70, its Director of Finance was in no mood to celebrate, "Until they [financial problems] are overcome we shall have no prosperity cake to divide. That for 1970-71 has already crumbled before we can put a knife into it".¹⁹

The industry's poor financial performance can be partially attributed to a matrix of external factors that management had little or no control over. Saddled with a crippling opening debt of £1bn, they were obliged to pay the Treasury astonishingly high interest repayments.²⁰ Compounding this situation was Harold Wilson's fiscal policy, with his November 1967 devaluation of the pound dramatically increasing production costs. In 1968/9, the industry was forced to absorb £50m in additional expenses, whilst a system of restrictive Government price controls diminished revenue by approximately £70m that year alone.²¹

¹⁸ BSC, *Annual Report and Accounts 1970-71* (London, 1971), p. x. For studies of BSC's overall financial performance see by A.M. Blair, 'The British Iron and Steel Industry since 1945', *Journal of European Economic History*, 26.3 (1997), pp. 571-581; and Bryer *et al.*, *Accounting for British Steel*.

¹⁹ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, September 1970.

²⁰ In 1967/8 Grosvenor Place were forced to pay £20m interest on capital loans. See BSC, *Annual Report and Accounts 1967/8* (London, 1968), p. 10.

²¹ BSC, *Annual Report and Accounts 1967/8* (London, 1968), p. 4; and BSC, *Annual Report and Accounts 1968/9* (London, 1969), p. 4.

The situation compelled Keith Ovenden to conclude that early financial losses came as a result of “political intervention rather than incompetence on the part of the BSC”.²² This judgement, however, overlooks the many internal failings that squeezed profits in this formative period. Several new development schemes, for example, were behind schedule, whilst those that were eventually completed were plagued with technical problems. The Corporation also experienced a series of labour disputes, most notably at Port Talbot, where the entire Blast Furnace Department was mothballed for two long months in 1970. These and other internal factors meant BSC were left unable to satisfy lucrative contracts. Grosvenor Place thereby earned a reputation for unreliability, prompting domestic users to turn to foreign rivals.²³ Eventually, these private sector re-rollers would choose to develop their very own steelmaking facilities rather than return to the Corporation.²⁴

In the face of these production problems, pressure was on senior management to get on with the task of reconstruction. It was expected that planners would move swiftly to devise their inaugural modernisation plan. They instead became distracted by the administrative work involved with reorganisation, meaning the announcement of BSC’s maiden development strategy was postponed until January 1969, eighteen months after vesting day. The delay was caused by the industry’s first organisational model; with the original geographical group boards encouraging regional autonomy

²² Ovenden, *Politics of Steel*, p. 189.

²³ In 1968/69, as pressure from domestic steel users mounted, a humiliated BSC was forced to purchase imported semi-finished steel to supplement its own output and meet demand. This move not only cost Grosvenor Place millions of pounds but also its reputation amongst private steel producers.

²⁴ Cottrell, *The Giant*, p. 73.

and internal rivalries. As a result of this, very few major schemes were commissioned in the first two years of operations:

This initial structure perpetuated the investment policy of the private industry, with each regional (and otherwise heterogenous) group submitting its own plans. Since it encouraged local autonomy, at the expense of central investment and rationalisation planning, and hence ran directly counter to the aim of building up a unified business entity.²⁵

When it was finally laid bare, the plan revealed that Grosvenor Place was committed to certain existing production sites. Misleadingly labelled the 'Heritage Plan', it pursued a relatively ambitious capacity target of 34m t/p/a by 1974/5, setting an average annual budget of £175m. An overall manpower reduction of 40,000 would be achieved by way of voluntary early retirements, natural wastage and phased recruitment – and not compulsory mass redundancies.²⁶ Although the Corporation foresaw the rundown of a handful of individual departments or units, no fully-integrated sites were expected to close until 1975 at the very earliest. Rationalisation would be gradual, allowing the continued effectiveness of the Corporation's social policies.

Despite an interim commitment to traditional Victorian-era sites, an entirely different long-term approach had already entered management thinking.²⁷ The first strategy

²⁵ Abromeit, *British Steel*, p. 123. For an analysis of the original organisational framework, see Ovenden, *Politics of Steel*, pp. 145-150.

²⁶ Approximately 12,000 of these workers were expected to be absorbed in new developments.

²⁷ Heal described the first development plan as a "series of interim decisions" that allowed the Corporation to utilise existing plant until planners had settled on a long-term strategy. See Heal, *The Steel Industry*, p. 162.

funnelled the majority of the development budget into facilities that were seen to have a viable long-term future beyond heritage and, over the next half-decade, investment was largely concentrated on only a handful of steelmaking sites.²⁸ In the case of Bilston's special steels sector, the main beneficiary was a collection of works in South Yorkshire. Under the Heritage Plan, £5.5m was invested in a brand-new bar rolling complex at Rotherham, with a further £8m earmarked to expand steel-making facilities.²⁹ When making the announcement, an industry spokesperson revealed the Corporation's long-term objective of concentrating the bulk of special steels production on a 12-mile square corridor in the Sheffield-Rotherham area:

This scheme is only part of the bar rolling complex being planned for Rotherham. Provisional planning approval has been given by the BSC for the development of a proposal to install a high production modern design mill of about 400,000 tons capacity to roll straight bar. It is intended that the mill will incorporate all the latest features to achieve high efficiency and product quality. It could be located on a levelled site at Aldwarke and would allow further rationalisation of the production of special steel bars.³⁰

The strategy of focusing resources and production on specific regions can be traced back to March 1968, when industry planners visited Japan for a factfinding mission. Led by Melchett's Deputy and heir apparent, Dr. Montague 'Monty' Finniston, the BSC

²⁸ Major investments under the first plan, including £42m at Port Talbot; £133m at Scunthorpe; £38m on Teesside; £34.5m at Ravenscraig and £42m at Newport. See BSC, *Annual Report and Accounts 1968/9* (London, 1969), p. 13.

²⁹ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 18 March 1971.

³⁰ *The Times*, 12 March 1971.

team became convinced that the Asian powerhouse's remarkable post-war revival was the result of its steel industry being rationalised into only a handful of fully-integrated super plants relying on advanced technology.³¹ Arriving back in the UK, the Corporation's ideas man outlined his plans for the industry:

[The] gains to be made from scrapping existing plants and building new ones is so great that it may be better not to wait until pieces of equipment have measured out their economic lives. We cannot wait until everything dies a natural death ... This leads to the concept of large blast furnaces, of increased LD steelmaking, rolling mills with more flexible output, lower usage of manpower, ports capable of taking large bulk carriers for the import of high-quality iron ore, and sophisticated finishing plants.³²

Despite temporarily committing to traditional productions units, the Corporation had already made the decision to import the Japanese model, a fateful decision according to steel industry scholar Charles Docherty:

The biggest single investment made, the Ten Year Development Strategy, was based upon a hysterical reaction to Japanese success whereby the Japanese model was taken as being the only ideal. No thought was given to a flexible approach utilising existing British conditions, and developing a number of

³¹ Dr. Finniston earned a PhD at the Royal College, before becoming the chief metallurgist at the UK Atomic Energy Authority at Harwell. His interest in Japanese industry began in 1964 when he helped negotiate a contract to supply fuel elements to the country's Atomic Power Company.

³² *The Steel News: Northern and Tubes Group Edition*, April 1968.

medium-scale steelmaking sites; a futile attempt was made instead to create Japan in Britain.³³

Seeking to import this development model, planners were already seriously doubting the long-term commercial viability of smaller integrated facilities such as Bilston.

A Better Tomorrow?

Whilst Monty Finniston and his team worked on the second development strategy, they faced the prospect of an altered political environment, with Edward Heath's rejuvenated Conservative Party securing a shock election victory in June 1970. The Tory manifesto, 'A Better Tomorrow', had promised to adopt a "hands-off" approach to those industries previously nationalised by their Labour counterparts.³⁴ However, upon assuming office, Industry Minister, John Davies, refused to deny press rumours surrounding denationalisation. This led to a great deal of anxiety at Grosvenor Place, with Melchett forced to issue a public statement:

The industry must have a period of stability to consolidate and move rapidly ahead with developments which within the next decade will re-establish this country among the world leaders ... We have had a long period of uncertainty and under investment throughout British industry. Steel has suffered more than most due to its massive political involvement – a complete decade without any major investment and many instances of inadequate maintenance of old

³³ Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 230.

³⁴ J. Campbell, *Edward Heath: A Biography* (London, 1994), p. 442.

facilities. We must establish a pattern of sustained growth in this country accompanied by a much higher rate of investment. We shall only do this if we stop changing the rules of the game the whole time and get on with play.³⁵

This desperate call for stability was, nonetheless, disregarded by an administration opposed to BSC's very existence. Speaking in December 1970, Davies hinted he was looking to "scrutinise" the ownership pattern of the industry.³⁶ This would come in the form of two separate reviews. The first concerned pricing, with Whitehall balking at a management request to sanction a 14 per cent increase that would generate an additional £165m in turnover per annum. The Government, looking to protect their friends in the private sector, halved the price hike. Explaining his decision, Davies made it known that, by curbing overall revenue, he was looking to force management to live within their means:

My action will clearly compel the Corporation to operate within a greater financial restraint and will thus make it necessary for it to press ahead with its efforts to reduce costs and maximise efficiency.³⁷

This arbitrary decision coincided with the arrival of a temporary depression. With political pressure on Melchett mounting, Davies ordered his organisation to breakeven by March 1973.³⁸

³⁵ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 5 November 1970.

³⁶ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 17 December 1970.

³⁷ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 22 April 1971.

³⁸ In the meantime, he was forced to give guarantees BSC would limit its annual losses to £100m over each of the next two financial years. For a full examination of the price control issue see Cottrell, *The Giant*, pp. 194-211.

The new Government's ideologically driven steel strategy came as a severe shock to industry insiders, with *The Steel News* describing it as "hard as steel".³⁹ On the one hand, Whitehall had deliberately slashed vital sales revenue, whilst on the other, it demanded unworkable financial gains. Grosvenor Place was now faced with an unenviable situation: a sharp fall in demand, spiralling costs and a Government statute preventing the generation of much needed supplementary income. This three-pronged assault would have significant repercussions for tens of thousands of steelworkers.

With the industry's cash flow position worsening, management was forced to expedite a series of rationalisation measures originally scheduled to begin in the second half of the decade. In March 1971 they announced the advanced closure of Openshaw in Manchester; Gorseinon in South Wales; and two sites in South Yorkshire. At a press conference the following month, a remorseful Melchett confirmed a further ten sites were to shut early. Crucially, in a move that signalled a major departure in BSC's burgeoning rationalisation programme, the cull included the permanent closure of a complete iron and steelworks works at Irlam in Salford.⁴⁰ The under-fire industry chief was by now cutting an increasingly lonely figure. Responding to press rumours, he

³⁹ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 22 April 1971.

⁴⁰ The Irlam announcement represented an alarming departure from the past, as it involved the proposed closure of a major, fully-integrated iron and steelworks. The decision opened a proverbial Pandora's Box and, by January 1972, a further 13,000 redundancy notices had been posted at works across the UK. During the first six months of that year, 22 minor plants were either shut permanently or partially closed, with the loss of a further 5,000 jobs. See *The Times*, 8 January 1972; and *The Times*, 24 June 1972.

unconvincingly denied charges that the closure announcements were the result of political pressure:

The present falling off in demand for steel, had presented the BSC with more flexibility to organise these proposals, than it had had during the boom conditions of last year. But I must emphasise that these measures have emerged from our planning over a long period and would have been proposed in any event.⁴¹

To many, Melchett's protestations rang hollow. Weeks later, during a TV interview, a weary industry chief pleaded with his Whitehall paymasters:

I want a considerable degree of government confidence in the board and the top management team and the chaps on the floor doing the job. Let them get on with it for a bit. And if they haven't got that confidence don't interfere in detail, change the chap at the top but don't try and drive from the back seat.⁴²

The appeal fell on deaf ears. Amidst calls for his sacking from leading Conservative Party official Sir Gerald Nabarro, Melchett was forced into the indignity of handing over duties to his Deputy and new Chief Executive Monty Finniston.⁴³ Moreover, one of his

⁴¹ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 6 May 1971.

⁴² *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 8 June 1972.

⁴³ Whitehall and Grosvenor Place presented the management shake-up as an opportunity for Melchett to focus on developing BSC's external relations, though this was widely interpreted as a vote of no confidence. Dr. Finniston would be handed direct executive powers, with control over major policies, long-term strategy, development planning, personnel policies, overall organisation and relations with trade unions.

closest allies and Head of Sales, Will Camp, was sacked by a Government that refused to forgive him for previously working as an election adviser to Harold Wilson. An accomplished marketer, Camp had recently delivered the Corporation's successful 'Steel Appeal' campaign and represented a major loss to the industry. In a further attempt to undermine Melchett, his Director of Finance, Will Molyneux, was also forced to stepdown. Still, much worse was to come. Although the Government had resolved not to fully denationalise steel, they still hived-off some of its more profitable operations.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, with BSC's long-term modernisation plans still not yet resolved, Grosvenor Place would come under even greater Ministerial scrutiny.

The Corporation had by now already presented the Government with a provisional draft copy of their second development strategy, the 'Corporate Plan'. Whitehall, however, refused to endorse calls to spend £11bn extending overall capacity to 42.5m t/p/a by 1980/1.⁴⁵ Following a series of clashes, Davies forced BSC officials to work within a JSC.⁴⁶ Described by Labour Party spokesman on steel, Eric Varley, as a "constitutional monstrosity", the Committee was handed the responsibility of re-appraising capacity targets.⁴⁷ At the same time, the Government employed a U.S. based consultancy firm to produce their own parallel study. In May 1972 it was revealed the JSC, acting on the Americans' advice, had downgraded future capacity

⁴⁴ This included an agreement to sell sections of the Special Steels Division's River Don works in Sheffield to Firth Brown. In exchange, BSC took over the company's Shepcote Lane site. However, despite assurances that the Corporation could now act with complete commercial freedom, the Conservative Government continued to implement price constraints for the remainder of their period in office.

⁴⁵ According to Richard Pryke, BSC's original demand forecasts caused "alarm and incredulity" within the Government. See Pryke, *Public Enterprise*, pp. 188-189.

⁴⁶ For an examination of the JSC, see Ovenden, *Politics of Steel*, pp. 175-183.

⁴⁷ 851 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1973) col. 263.

to 28-36m t/p/a. This figure, by international standards at least, appeared extremely conservative, with output in Japan and West Germany now standing at 93m and 45m respectively. Present domestic output, on the other hand, was already at the lower end of the new capacity target. Since entering office, the Conservatives had delayed, rejected and now downgraded the management's plans. With their wings clipped, BSC's much maligned Planning Division were handed the unenviable task of establishing the future pattern of production.

In December 1972 Peter Walker, who had recently replaced Davies at the DTI, signed-off the new modernisation programme. It was confirmed all commercial steelmaking would be concentrated on huge costal BOS plants in Port Talbot, Llanwern, Ravenscraig, Lackenby and Scunthorpe known as the 'Big Five'.⁴⁸ In a move that would have serious ramifications for Bilston, the manufacture of all special steels would indeed take place in the Sheffield-Rotherham area. In a subsequent Parliamentary debate, Walker refused to address the fate of individual works, much to the annoyance of steel constituency MPs within the Labour Party. They would have to wait until the publication of a White Paper three months later.

When it arrived, the 'Ten Year Strategy' confirmed all existing OH plants would be shut by 1980; with overall manning levels reduced by 40,000:

⁴⁸ A cluster of huge fully-integrated iron and steel producing works, ring fenced by BSC's long-term development strategy, were collectively dubbed the 'Big Five'. This tagline is a slight misnomer. Although the plan prompted the concentration of commercial, bulk steelmaking at these sites, all special steel production would be centred at a group of smaller sites located in South Yorkshire. This area would be protected at the expense of Bilston.

The implementation of the agreed strategy will bring major changes in the pattern of the Corporation's plants. The now obsolete open-hearth furnaces will be closed before the end of the decade. Bulk steelmaking by the oxygen process will be concentrated at the five main existing plants and the new Teesside works. Electric arc steelmaking will continue for stainless and alloy steels, and this capacity will be modernised and expanded; there will also be some modern electric steelmaking capacity for general steels. These works together are expected to provide the whole of the Corporation's steelmaking. At other centres steelmaking will eventually be phased out; although BOS and electric arc steelmaking will continue at some of the smaller plants until at least the end of the decade.⁴⁹

Despite considerable fanfare, the Corporation's £3bn development strategy was both inherently flawed and, ultimately, poorly delivered. Derided by Heidrun Abromeit as the "great leap forward", it proved to be ludicrously overambitious, especially in light of the coming world steel crisis.⁵⁰ Improved economies of scale, the entire rationale for the chosen 'bigger is better' approach, could only be achieved under maximum load conditions. When projected market trends failed to come to fruition, those larger units not working at 95 per cent of their overall capacity incurred huge financial losses.⁵¹ Moreover, the decision to manufacture certain steel products at only one

⁴⁹ BSC, *Ten Year Development Strategy*. HMSO Cmnd. 5226, February 1973.

⁵⁰ Abromeit, *British Steel*, p. 129. Richard Pryke suggests that, in a duplicitous attempt to justify decision to import the Japanese model, planners engaged in a process of "statistical legerdemain"; deliberately manipulating the results of planning exercises to suit their own expansionist agenda. See Pryke, *Public Enterprise*, p. 190.

⁵¹ A. Cockerill, *The Steel Industry: International Comparisons of Industrial Structure and Performance* (Cambridge, 1974).

facility meant technical delays, power shortages or local strikes prohibited the Corporation from sourcing alternative supplies.⁵² Monty Hughes, a steelworker from South Wales, highlighted these and many other shortcomings:

Where did the Ten Year Strategy go wrong? The corporate strategists did not design BSC to cope with the current world steel crisis. It is easy to criticise with hindsight, but the first strategy was too ambitious in the first place. It was based on a number of assumptions ... BSC seemed to disregard the ever-increasing world overcapacity, the greater role of developing countries with their raw materials and need to employ large numbers. Economies of size and scale were once regarded as the great principles of business. BSC went for five coastal plants but they lacked flexibility of response.⁵³

The final sentence refers to BSC's decision to ignore the commercial benefits of smaller works such as Bilston. These traditionally profitable facilities enjoyed intimate relations with their customers, the majority of which were situated in close proximity. The West Midlands, for example, contained 57 per cent of the Corporation's home market for special carbon semis, 55 per cent of which was supplied by Bilston.⁵⁴ One of Bilston's leading shop stewards identified the symbiotic relationship his colleagues had developed with local steel users:

⁵² This issue was later highlighted by the enforced partial closure of South Yorkshire's special steel sites during the January 1979 haulage strike.

⁵³ *Man and Metal*, July/August 1978.

⁵⁴ JWP, *The Future of Bilston Works*, 31 March 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/4, p. 4.

The Corporation has never learned how to sell steel. We know our customers here in the Midlands. We can give them what they want. We can even run through small orders for engineering firms when they run out of stock. We are flexible and that's what our customers expect. If we can't provide what they want they import.⁵⁵

Indeed, small tonnage orders were Bilston's bread and butter, with the plant supplying 61 per cent of BSC's carbon billet orders below 20 tonnes.⁵⁶ But this successful 'less is more' approach put it at odds with the Corporation's new grandiose vision:

'We could get an order for a five-ton ingot and turn it out overnight. But that's just about four ounces of dolly mixtures in BSC terms' ... with the emphasis on what [Mr Turner] calls the 'big boss plants', small outfits like Bilston are at the bottom of the Corporation's priority treatment list.⁵⁷

Such operating flexibility, combined with lower capital costs, allowed Bilston to retain profitability at much lower production levels than what Black Country steelmen sardonically labelled 'Cathedrals-by-the-sea'.

The Corporation were patently aware of the many benefits of traditional, smaller production units, with one leading planner acknowledging:

⁵⁵ *The Guardian*, 1 July 1978.

⁵⁶ JURUE, *The Future of Bilston Steelworks: An Appraisal*, March 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/4, p. 41.

⁵⁷ *The Observer*, 2 July 1978.

But do not let us assume for one moment that massive capital investment in modern equipment is an absolute guarantee of efficient, low-cost production. If one examines the results at existing Works within the Corporation, it is not always the plant on which vast sums have been lavished which provides the best result. The most efficient plants, measured either by technical or commercial standards, are scattered across the whole range of Works, large or small, old or modern, well or badly located. Why is this so? ... it may be due to more intangible factors, such as top-rate management with its finger closely on the pulse of production, with complete understanding between men and management and a recognition of the necessity to succeed which is often engendered by small communities, anxious to keep a local industry going.⁵⁸

When published in February 1973, however, the White Paper's position on mini-works was deliberately vague.⁵⁹ The document mentioned Bilston, Shelton and Irlam as potential recipients of a new electric arc steelmaking facility. The issue was taken up in Parliament by Varley, who highlighted management's contradictory stance:

That brings me to the mystery of the mobile mini-mills. Whenever an hon. Member asks him about the fate of any doomed area, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry puts in his thumb and pulls out a mini-mill. When the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Sir R. Cary) asked what was to become of Irlam, the Secretary of State replied: Irlam is a possible candidate

⁵⁸ *The Steel News: Northern and Tubes Group Edition*, March 1969.

⁵⁹ For an extended review of the management decision to completely overlook smaller works, see Bryer *et al.*, *Accounting for British Steel*, pp. 81-88.

for a mini-mill in the future. — When my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Ashley) asked about Shelton, back came the Secretary of State, quick as a flash: ‘Shelton is ... a possible site for a minimill’. We are told, too, that Bilston is on the mini-mill list. The Government have deliberately created the impression that before long, wherever one goes in England, Scotland and Wales, it will be difficult to avoid stumbling over a gleaming new mini-mill. The Minister for Industry gave the game away on Monday of this week at Question Time. When he was asked about mini-mills by the hon. Member for Withington, who wants one for Irlam, he admitted that there were to be only two mini-mills in the whole of Britain. One is already allocated to Scotland. So, the question is, who gets the other mini-mill? Will it be Shelton, Irlam or Bilston, or will none of those three get it?⁶⁰

Varley’s suspicions were well placed. Weeks later, it was revealed that a second mini-works would only be required in “certain special eventualities”.⁶¹

As Grosvenor Place engaged in a completely counter-productive tonnage race, private sector producers eagerly embraced the mini-works concept. Between 1972 and 1977, nine electric arc vessels were built by Black Country firms. The Corporation would later admit that the expansion of the private sector in the region “pre-empted the justification for any new investment” at Bilston.⁶² Disregarding the commercial success of private sector mini-works, management stubbornly refused to adapt their

⁶⁰ 849 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1973) cols. 685-86.

⁶¹ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 5 April 1973.

⁶² Letter from R. Scholey to W. Sirs, 30 January 1979, ITSOF, BCA1/6.

thinking. Instead of stepping back and re-assessing the suitability of the Ten Year Strategy, Grosvenor Place steadfastly stuck to the 'bigger is better' premise throughout the world steel crisis.⁶³ In April 1979, the same month Bilston's heavy-end was shut, BSC's Chief Executive was asked if his organisation would finally consider focusing resources on viable mini-works rather than lossmaking coastal plants. His response was perplexing:

That is all very well but the fact is we have a lot of investment in bulk steel capacity and can't just spirit that away. We must make our bulk steel products fit for more demanding uses and that is why we are investing in quality improvement ... OK, there is some flexibility to go up market, but at the end of the day bulk steel plants produce bulk steel – you can't turn that into gold or silver.⁶⁴

With the premise of the second development plan already unsound, management contrived to exacerbate the situation with its delivery. A comedy of errors saw eye-watering sums of public money thrown at what the Bilston men labelled 'Finniston's Follies'. A new multi-million-pound blast furnace installed at Redcar was never lit, whilst £5m was spent breaking ground for an electric arc furnace at Shelton that didn't see the light of day. At Bilston BSC would invest £0.75m relining the blast furnace, only to mothball her eight weeks later, whilst a transport hub costing £1.6m remained

⁶³ J.J. Richardson and G.F. Dudley asserted the Ten Year Strategy proved to be of, "central importance in determining the scope and nature of the steel crisis in the late 1970s and early 1980s". See Richardson and Dudley, *Steel Policy*, p. 330.

⁶⁴ *The British Steelmaker*, April 1979.

unopened. A 1980 report revealed a staggering £353m was written-off on “abortive expenditure” under the Ten Year Strategy.⁶⁵

The Marginalisation of Bilston

There had in fact been questions over Bilston’s short-term future long before the publication of the White Paper, with the Corporation overseeing a process of managed decline on the ground. Upon formation, BSC officials reorganised the industry into multi-product Groups that operated independently from each other. Bilston, like all former S&L sites, was placed in the Northern and Tubes Group. The group was led by former company boss Nial MacDiarmid, who sought to protect the interests of his former plants at boardroom level.⁶⁶ However, it soon became apparent that the original organisational framework was impeding development. Grosvenor Place responded in March 1970 by re-dividing the industry into specific Product Divisions; meaning all works producing the same or similar items would be run by one single management team, regardless of their geographical location.

The impact reorganisation had on the future of Bilston cannot be overestimated, as it set in motion a series of events that would ultimately seal its fate a decade later. In a move that some saw as illogical, the plant was bundled into the unfamiliar surroundings of the Special Steels Division. The structure of Bilston’s new home was straightforward. The Division was separated into two separate components: the

⁶⁵ BSC, *A Business Proposal* (London, 1979).

⁶⁶ MacDiarmid proved to be a controversial figure, regularly criticising public ownership in the press whilst receiving a paycheque from Grosvenor Place.

Forges, Foundries and Engineering Group and the Steel Works Group. Bilston was absorbed into the latter, which comprised of facilities producing stainless, alloy and high-grade carbon steels. The Steel Works Group's principal production units were S&TP and Rotherham, a cluster of sites in South Yorkshire. Between them, they employed 22,000 men, approximately 79 per cent of all those employed by the Group. Bilston, along with Wolverhampton and Birchley rolling mills, was brought under the banner of BWB.

Bilston would be governed by a divisional management team housed at The Mount, a stark neo-classical building in Sheffield. Its offices were dominated by men who possessed close personal ties with South Yorkshire and, more specifically, the USC. New Special Steels boss, H. P. Forder, was a former General Managing Director. His Deputy and eventual replacement, P. Bromley, joined United Steels as a commercial trainee, before becoming a Director in 1963. Alongside Forder and Bromley was another former company man, Robert Scholey. A future Corporation Chief Executive and Chairman, he would play a key role in the closure of Bilston, earning him the moniker 'Black Bob' from local steelmen. Another ex-USC man was Dr. David 'Mother Hubbard' Grieves, Divisional Director of Personnel who, as future head of BSC's Social Policy Division, would also be directly involved in Bilston's demise.

By the time the industry had been reorganised a second time in April 1976, almost all of the Corporation's senior positions were filled by South Yorkshiremen, with four former USC employees named amongst the organisation's five Managing Directors. In July 1980, the same month Scholey and Grieves ordered the closure of Bilston's

mills, the ISTC highlighted the historical domination South Yorkshiremen had over policymaking:

BSC has been immeasurably harmed by having all the members of its top executive tier drawn from just one of the 14 former companies (United Steels) and from only one part of the country (Yorkshire). The monopoly of power has resulted in too many costly errors and too narrow an outlook.⁶⁷

Moreover, private sector steelmakers made a similar observation, with the editor of *The British Steelmaker* concluding:

All those cracks that were flying around a few years ago about the Mafia (i.e. United Steel) getting all the top jobs in British Steel Corporation now appear to have been prophecies rather than jokes. Look at the first appointments in the new system of organisation and what do we find? Four United Steel men named as managing directors of the new geographical divisions, and only one outsider. Score for the Mafia, 80%.⁶⁸

This situation prompted Greg Bamber to conclude that the behaviour of the so-called Sheffield Mafia was driven by an unbridled belief in their own permanency:

United Steels had been dominant there (Sheffield) and former United Steels directors gained a strong position in BSC's internal political system. Informal

⁶⁷ *The ISTC Banner*, July 1980.

⁶⁸ *The British Steelmaker*, November/December 1975.

alliances between such powerholders are especially important during periods of uncertainty and may help to alleviate feelings of vulnerability. Hence most BSC directors and managers in Sheffield felt more secure than their counterparts elsewhere.⁶⁹

In the meantime, divisional management exhibited an explicit bias towards their former company facilities at the expense of Bilston. They thereby adopted a number of discriminatory trading practices that would negatively impact the plant's commercial viability. An intrusive personnel policy, for example, saw management repeatedly and consistently poach Bilston's best and brightest staffers and middle-managers, robbing the plant of vital experience and expertise. Workers were frequently head-hunted, with H. B. Hawksley, Head of Sales, transferred northwards to become the Division's Commercial Director. He was followed by Keith Goodchild, Primary Mills Manager, who was appointed as the Head of Operations at The Mount. Another was the much-loved Works Doctor James Carson, an internationally renowned expert on industrial health, who was transferred to Rotherham following two decades in the Black Country. Bilston's steelmen also waved goodbye to Stuart Walters, who was appointed Works Engineer at Rotherham. The Mills Manager had been employed since 1962, during which time S&L sponsored his degree in mechanical engineering. Later in the decade, the Corporation would cynically transfer staffers known to have supported the anti-closure campaign.

Heading in the opposite direction were several apprentice managers from South Yorkshire, with Bilston functioning as a training school for The Mount. At the time of

⁶⁹ Bamber, *Militant Managers?*, p. 117.

the first reorganisation, for example, the plant's General Manager was Gordon Forster, an expert metallurgist who joined Bilston as an apprentice during WWII. Despite complaints from the men, the popular boss was forced into early retirement. Rather than replacing Forster internally, as had always been the case under S&L, BSC parachuted in Derek Saul, the poster boy of the South Yorkshire special steel industry. A Rotherham native, he had earned a degree in metallurgy in Sheffield before joining BSC. The unpopular figure proved to have no affinity to the Black Country or indeed its inhabitants, demonstrating very little sympathy to his men when the Ten Year Strategy was announced. He later found infamy for mocking the accents of union negotiators on the eve of the 1980 national steel strike. After only twelve months at Bilston, Saul returned to Sheffield as Director of the Steels Works Group. He was succeeded by P. Allen, yet another ex-USC man. In a move that caused a great deal of consternation, his new assistant was Bill Church, an accountant who possessed little technical knowledge of the industry. Before his arrival, the 33-year-old had overseen an internal audit that had prompted the expedition of BSC's closure programme.⁷⁰ The managerial merry-go-round continued, with Allen replaced as Bilston's General Manager by Eric Cotterill, yet another Rotherham man. The plant would eventually become a rudderless ship when his replacement, George Blakeley, was transferred to Rotherham. The decision not only left Bilston with no resident manager on the ground, but also without representation within the corridors of power in South Yorkshire.

The overall impact of BSC's revolving doors strategy was subsequently outlined by one union official:

⁷⁰ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Works Edition*, 4 July 1975.

The promise of a higher degree of autonomy to works managements which heralded in the new Chairman of the BSC has not materialised, and we now feel that the directive from 33 Grosvenor Place is merely diffused through Divisional management, leaving in very few cases, works managements who care for the welfare of the units they supervise. Gone is the day when a works manager was prepared to fight tooth and nail for his own unit. Indeed, as we have seen, so fluid is the position of works managers, that the provision of a caravan to each could be regarded as a cost saving exercise.⁷¹

Another highlighted the impact this had had on Bilston:

We have noted in recent years the management of the Special Steels Division have not been prepared to leave a permanent manager in charge of the Bilston plant, and that the plant has had to suffer a succession of managers, who regarded the job at Bilston as nothing more than a stepping stone. These are management techniques that must sadden the heart of every industrial economist who is looking for industrial efficiency within any company.⁷²

The mistreatment of Bilston wasn't limited to The Mount's personnel policy, with management introducing several harmful trading practices that prompted one particular convenor to complain, "I am very suspicious of the motive of the Sheffield people. It would appear to me that they are quite prepared to deliver all the pain to

⁷¹ Proceedings from ISTC No.4 Division Conference of Branch Officers, 15 April 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

⁷² *Man and Metal*, January/February 1979.

Bilston and keep all the goodies themselves”.⁷³ By lodging this complaint, the frustrated steelworker was specifically referring to the problem of unfair or preferential plant loading – a process that began with reorganisation and intensified over the next decade. In January 1972, for example, Bilston’s entire tube order book was confiscated and reallocated to South Yorkshire. Despite overcoming the loss of these lucrative orders by expanding its product portfolio, the decision to siphon off Bilston’s tube market was an assault on profitability.⁷⁴ The Works Council was subsequently informed that a new centralised ordering system had been introduced, meaning control of Bilston’s orderbook was transferred to Sheffield. From here on in, works in South Yorkshire were allocated the Division’s most lucrative orders, many of which had been secured by Bilston’s Sales Department. Approximately 20,000 tonnes of round billet business was transferred to S&TP, though half of the tonnage eventually drifted back to the Black Country due to customer complaints over quality.⁷⁵ An independent report revealed how divisional management ignored calls from UK steel users to be supplied by Bilston:

BSC’s centralised ordering system at Rotherham creates a number of problems in determining the ‘real’ demand for Bilston’s products since many companies claimed that their preferences for Bilston steel were not being met by BSC. This is, perhaps, almost inevitable with such a centralised system and BSC would undoubtedly argue that they use the system to try and provide the best service

⁷³ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 18 November 1977.

⁷⁴ The decision to transfer a lucrative contract supplying 100,000 t/p/a to Newport works was made despite complaints from Welsh steelworkers that replacement steel from South Yorkshire was of an inferior quality.

⁷⁵ JWP, *The Future of Bilston Works*, March 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/4, p. 5.

to the clients of the Sheffield Division as a whole. Nevertheless, 5 companies expressed strongly the opinion that re-routing occurs, since they have found that consistently preferencing Bilston on their BSC orders carries no guarantee that their steel will actually come from there.⁷⁶

With the Corporation re-routing more and more orders to supposedly lower cost facilities, Bilston was eventually forced to operate at only 77 per cent of its overall capacity rating, whilst facilities in Sheffield and Rotherham worked at 88 and 98 per cent respectively. Management's preferential loading policy not only placed Bilston steelmen in an invidious position, but it also led to reduced earnings and manning levels. Meanwhile, their colleagues in South Yorkshire worked overtime hours to absorb Bilston's orderbook. The morality of this was questioned by local shop stewards who argued that, if their plant was indeed part of the Corporation's 'special steel family' – as stated during reorganisation in March 1970 – orders should be spread evenly.⁷⁷ Union officials agreed, with Congress House asserting:

The Liaison Committee take the view that BSC in deciding on plant loading should not throw ethical considerations out of the window. They argue that this is precisely what BSC are doing in taking away Bilston's traditional orders, which are in fact "their" orders by right. On the contrary, the policy should be to distribute the order load in such a way as to ensure that all works can survive in hard times. Mutual assistance in adversity was one of the underlying ideas of nationalisation itself. Related to this line of argument is the Liaison

⁷⁶ JURUE, *The Future of Bilston Steelworks: An Appraisal*, March 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/4, p. 44.

⁷⁷ Minutes of TUCSICC meeting, 11 May 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

Committee's belief that the Sheffield-based management who now control the destinies of Bilston are biased against the works, in favour of Sheffield works.⁷⁸

The most significant effect of reorganisation concerned investment, with management systematically withdrawing the works from their new modernising agenda. Having been crowbarred into Special Steels, the Black Country site suddenly found itself thrust amongst the largest network of electric arc steelmaking facilities in Europe. The vast proportion of which had been built in South Yorkshire by USC. Bilston, on the other hand, was the proverbial runt of the litter, with its OH furnaces installed during S&L's ill-fated post-war reconstruction.

As a profitable unit located in close proximity to its core market, it had originally been earmarked by Northern and Tubes Group chiefs to receive major investment. A proposed £12m 'BEACON' scheme, featuring two twin electric arcs and new Mills and Finishing End Departments, was drawn up by local shop stewards and management. In exchange for a relatively modest investment, the men had accepted cuts of 650 production jobs. Already sanctioned by Group management, the scheme was awaiting clearance when the industry was reorganised. However, with the Corporation preparing to concentrate on existing steelmaking facilities in South Yorkshire, BEACON was permanently shelved. Capital, meanwhile, was directed into Sheffield and Rotherham. Bilston, however, received only minor adjustments, with management operating what can be described as a patch and mend policy. What little modernisation that did occur under the first plan was entirely piecemeal. In November 1970, for example, the Corporation spent £140,000 ensuring Bilston complied with

⁷⁸ TUCSICC, *The Delay Paper*, September 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/4, p. 3.

weights and measures legislation.⁷⁹ Moreover, in a move that caused further concern on the shop-floor, management commissioned the building of a road-rail freight centre at the back of the works. The hub, designed to transport huge quantities of Yorkshire steel to Black Country re-rollers, was clear proof that BSC saw no long-term future for iron and steelmaking at Bilston.

The mistreatment of BWB under Special Steels Division did not go unnoticed. Bemoaning management's attitude towards Bilston's sister plant in Birchley, Peter Archer, Labour MP for Rowley Regis and Tipton, told Parliament:

We know that a large mill at Rotherham is envisaged producing about 8,000 tons a week. This was not announced baldly as a sudden sensation. Our complaint is not that the Corporation failed to cushion a sudden blow, but that it piled the cushions so as to conceal what it was doing, until it was burned through, and it was only when events revealed the process that it was discovered that orders were directed elsewhere and employees suspected, perhaps not unnaturally, that the mills were being quietly run down ...⁸⁰

Following the marginalisation of their works under the Heritage Plan, local steelmen were hardly surprised by the recommendations of the Ten Year Strategy. Paragraph 57 of the White Paper confirmed their worst fears:

⁷⁹ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 5 November 1970.

⁸⁰ 842 Parl. Deb. (5th ser.) (1972) col. 1819.

Only a small proportion of present steelmaking capacity is located in the West Midlands and the North West. As already announced, the remaining open-hearth plant at Irlam will close by June 1974. That at Bilston, together with the Kaldo steelmaking at Shelton, must also be expected to close during the decade.⁸¹

On the day of its publication, an industry spokesperson announced the further expansion of Rotherham works. A new £23m state of the art complex would produce carbon steel for the Midland automotive and engineering industries – Bilston's primary market. Over the coming years money continued to pour into South Yorkshire and, by March 1978, an astonishing £152.5m or 76 per cent of the divisional budget had been allocated to facilities in either Rotherham or Sheffield. As Bilston was left to wither on the vine, the plant fell into a general state of disrepair. The minutes of subsequent Works Council meetings catalogue a succession of complaints over health and safety, with local engineers forced to plug holes in a leaking Primary Mill roof.⁸²

Preliminary Trade Union Responses to Rationalisation

In the TUCSICC, the six major organisations involved in the industry possessed a ready-made platform from which to coordinate a coherent anti-closure plan from the centre. However, with the rival unions in a state of conflict, Congress House would

⁸¹ BSC, *Ten Year Development Strategy*. HMSO Cmnd. 5226, February 1973.

⁸² Minutes of Primary Mills Joint Consultative Council meeting, 1 February 1979, WCA, DW-173/1/1.

only muster a fragmented and passive response to the Corporation's preliminary rationalisation programme.⁸³

The Steel Committee was chaired by the ISTC's Dai Davies. Following nationalisation, the Welshman developed a problematic relationship with TUC General Council members who accused him of supporting anti-union legislation by refusing to back their 1971 'Kill the Bill Campaign'.⁸⁴ The General Secretary was also unpopular with his steel union colleagues. The previous Labour Government had originally hoped that, by establishing the TUCSICC, the rival production, craft, general and white-collar unions would reconcile historic differences, but the alliance merely exposed old wounds. Firstly, there had been a protracted fall out between the Confederation and the white-collar unions over staff representation. There was also what was described as the "long war of attrition" with SIMA over middle-management recognition.⁸⁵ Within the Steel Committee, the ISTC constantly clashed with the NCCC-affiliated craft unions whilst, on the production side, there were concerns amongst the NUB that Swinton House was a power hungry monolith. Such intra-organisational rivalry scuppered early attempts at a coordinated response to rationalisation. By the time the TUC managed to bring the warring unions together to discuss a formal counter-policy, two whole years had passed since the first wave of expedited mass redundancy announcements. Notwithstanding the summit, the TUCSICC organisations would be

⁸³ Despite historically enjoying an insider status, J.J. Richardson and G.F. Dudley have identified how the steel unions struggled to find a, "coherent role" in the development of public sector steel. See Richardson and Dudley, *Steel Policy*, p. 325.

⁸⁴ Two years later, when Congress organised a May Day strike to protest the Government's prices and income policy, Davies prohibited members from participating.

⁸⁵ Upham, *Tempered*, p. 76.

in a near-permanent state of fragmented impotence for the remainder of Davies' term in office.⁸⁶

Of key significance was a strict refusal to produce an alternative to BSC's development strategy, in addition to a reluctance to support any one particular threatened works over another. The reason for this inertia was later outlined by Congress House:

Ever since nationalisation, the Committee have thought fit not to formulate a detailed and specific policy of their own with regard to BSC's corporate planning. The main reason for this has been their desire to avoid making proposals which would inevitably, because of the logic of the situation, have led them to specifically accept that at least some works would have to close – at a time when every works in the country was absolutely opposed to any idea of closure. The Committee felt that their acceptance, even in principle, that certain specific plants would have to close would have cut the ground from under the feet of the workers concerned and almost certainly have led to a transfer of their loyalty to unofficial bodies ...⁸⁷

Despite having significant resources at their disposal, the TUCSICC displayed zero interest in producing its own modernisation plan. Some individual unions acted independently. The AUEW, for example, published a paper forecasting that approximately 100,000 steelmen would eventually be shed under the Corporation's

⁸⁶ Although in July 1975 the ISTC and NUB met to discuss how to reduce intra-organisational rivalry, relations remained uneasy throughout the period covered by this thesis.

⁸⁷ Minutes of TUCSICC meeting, 13 April 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

second development plan, but failed to establish ways in which this could be prevented.⁸⁸ The NUB leadership supported an alternative strategy proposed by their Scunthorpe members. The Fabian Society, meanwhile, produced a hybrid strategy that called on management to retain profitable mini-works as flexible support plants for the Big Five.⁸⁹ In the view of Peter Bowen, the most vocal opposition came from Transport House:

The clearest opposition to the philosophy of ISTC, however, was expressed by the TGWU. The TGWU recruits in the field of semi-skilled and unskilled labour in areas of the industry outside direct production. At its biennial delegate conference in July 1973 it rejected BSC's steel strategy on both social and economic grounds and called upon the TUC's Iron and Steel Consultative Committee to secure its reversal. Meanwhile, it pledged support to its members in the industry to the point of selected strikes, sit-ins, work-ins and workers' take overs.⁹⁰

Nevertheless, without the support of the Steel Committee, and management steadfastly committed to the Japanese model, these views were easily snubbed by decisionmakers.

The ISTC, as the largest and most powerful steel union, was expected to establish its own policy. Davies was a vocal critic of Conservative Government interference,

⁸⁸ AUEW, *An expanding Future for British Steel* (London, 1974).

⁸⁹ Fabian Society, *Crisis in Steel* (London, 1974).

⁹⁰ Bowen, *Social Control*, p. 159.

accusing Edward Heath of lacking a “social conscience” and assuming the mentality of a Victorian-era ironmaster.⁹¹ Whilst turning his ire on the Prime Minister, the outspoken union leader was, nevertheless, muted in his criticism of the Ten Year Strategy. At Congress in 1972, for example, he lambasted an NCCC resolution attacking management’s plans:

On the contrary, Lord Melchett is entitled to full credit for the great fight he has put up to preserve the public sector in the state in which the Labour Government put it. We know this is a fact and I think he is entitled to full credit for it. I think he was encouraged by the certain knowledge that the trade unions in the industry fully supported him ... Those who supported the principle of public ownership did so because they believed it was only a publicly-owned steel industry that could make the decisions necessary to make the industry efficient, competitive and economically viable. The unions knew that when the industry was nationalised, changes were inevitable. The argument, therefore, was not so much about the need for change as it was about the atmosphere in which changes took place.⁹²

⁹¹ *Man and Metal*, April 1971.

⁹² *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 14 September 1972. With the debate over, Davies and his fellow TUCSICC leaders were guests of honour at a BSC reception – a tradition that would continue throughout the decade. Following Melchett’s death, the ISTC expressed its admiration for the manner in which he had oversaw rationalisation, “Dedicated as he undoubtedly was to modernising the nationalised steel industry to make it efficient and competitive, he was not insensitive to the human problems involved in the British Steel Corporation’s modernisation programme”. See *Man and Metal*, July 1973.

The speech reveals an extension to the pro-modernising agenda traditionally adopted by Swinton House. Having met with Monty Finniston in November 1972, Davies had pleaded with his Executive not to block management's plans, "otherwise the Confederation's [future] influence would be greatly restricted".⁹³ A warning not to rock the boat was immediately conveyed to members:

The intense anger and deep resentment felt by the Corporation employees are the natural and understandable emotions of men and women faced with unemployment, but there is a danger that these emotions might provoke resistance to all modernisation plans – even those by a future Labour government.⁹⁴

Faced with a dilemma of choosing between greater prosperity and job security for members employed at the Big Five or protecting those at traditional steelmaking sites, the Confederation opted to sacrifice the latter on the altar of technological progress. Davies' position was further outlined in December 1972. When responding to Peter Walker's confirmation that BSC's second development strategy would indeed sound the death knell for tens of thousands of his members, he astonishingly proclaimed the news had brought a "sense of relief":

While it may not be the primary function of a trade union to promote economic logic, to completely disregard it would be a betrayal of many thousands of workers who will be employed in the modern steel industry of the future. To

⁹³ Minutes of ISTC EC meeting, 15 November 1972, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/9.

⁹⁴ *Man and Metal*, July 1972.

insist that uneconomic plant should be kept operational regardless of the consequences would be to court disaster.⁹⁵

Davies even warned steel constituency MPs against voting down the White Paper, claiming it would be reckless and selfish of them to, “pretend that modernisation of the steel industry can be carried out without the closure of out-to-date plant”.⁹⁶

In a failed attempt to pacify affected parties, the Confederation leadership espoused a ‘no redundancies before alternative jobs’ posture, crystallised in a formal resolution drafted in March 1973:

Should these investigations conclude that a plant closure is inevitable such closure shall not take place until satisfactory job opportunities have been made available in the locality for all those who will be made redundant, and in this connection special attention is drawn to the major responsibility which the Government bears.⁹⁷

The decree, whilst calling for the temporary postponement of all planned closures until replacement jobs had been secured, made absolutely no attempt to question the logic behind the ‘bigger is better’ approach – effectively endorsing the dismantling of the industry. To add a veil of legitimacy to this controversial position, Swinton House arranged a historic national conference in London. Astonishingly, on arrival, the 150

⁹⁵ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 25 January 1973.

⁹⁶ *Man and Metal*, February 1973.

⁹⁷ *Man and Metal*, May 1973.

delegates in attendance discovered the resolution was immutable. Following a completely fatuous mandatory vote, attendees engaged in a verbal sparring match with a leader who they accused of unilaterally imposing his will on members. Davies then merely inflamed the situation further:

But I don't use the social problems and frustrations caused by economic change to promote my own personality – I get down to the thankless task of doing what I am paid to do and my record in the steel industry stands in comparison with anyone else's in or outside the industry.⁹⁸

Notwithstanding the strength of opposition from the rank and file, the national resolution became the Confederation's mantra for the remainder of Davies' tenure and beyond. But the alternative jobs strategy would prove entirely flawed. As this chapter has identified, Grosvenor Place had introduced a series of measures that initially alleviated the human cost of rationalisation. When exposed to a worldwide recession, however, these measures were rendered woefully inadequate. Even though Davies would acknowledge to a June 1973 Parliamentary Select Committee that his union's defence strategy had already been undermined, he continued to support management's development policy:

There is no longer reasonably full employment and in many of the areas where closures are taking place, or to be expected, the chances of redundant workers finding work outside the steel industry are not good ... Failure to keep abreast of technological progress and the preservation of obsolete plant for social

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

reasons would, even if the necessary subsidising could be reconciled with ECSC. regulations, be disastrous for the long term future of British industry.⁹⁹

The ISTC summit merely exposed a rift that had already appeared between Swinton House and its lay members. The reaction to Peter Walker's statement elicited an angry response from one member, who demanded an end to redundancies for the sake of progress:

During the past years, steel workers in this country have been plagued with the common disease of technological change. Of course, the experts tell us that this is an industrial disease, a hazard of industry that we must accept and endure in the interests of progress. We are told, repeatedly and untiringly, that in order to survive we must rationalise. In the interest of this progress and rationalisation 50,000 redundancies are forecast, so I pose the question 'Progress for whom?' ... I suggest the time is long overdue to cry halt to this 'slaughtering' of our members.¹⁰⁰

The events surrounding the April 1973 special delegate conference illustrate how, in the words of Huw Beynon, "if the [union] leadership becomes isolated from the masses, its autonomy degenerates into empty talk".¹⁰¹ The compliance and 'empty talk' of steel union bureaucrats placed the burden of responsibility on ordinary steelworkers. The limited nature of the Corporation's preliminary rationalisation

⁹⁹ *Man and Metal*, June 1973.

¹⁰⁰ *Man and Metal*, January 1973.

¹⁰¹ H. Beynon, *Working for Ford* (London, 1973), p. 178.

programme had meant there were, at first, few examples of grassroots resistance. This would all change under Heath, with the March and April 1971 redundancy announcements prompting some of the UK's more proactive rank and file workers to self-organise. The first official WAC was formed by workers at Stanton in Derbyshire, though they were soon followed by colleagues at sites possessing a more pronounced trade union consciousness or a longstanding tradition of organisation. These included the Welsh plants of Ebbw Vale, East Moors and Shotton, as well as River Don in Sheffield and Irlam – facilities that were threatened by the Conservative Party's intrusion into BSC's affairs.

Although each WAC was unique, they all had the same two objectives: 1.) to postpone rationalisation, 2.) and to persuade policymakers to incorporate their respective plants into the industry's long-term operating plan. The following paragraphs will briefly explore the origins, membership, tactics and success of some of the more high-profile action committees who coordinated the initial wave of local resistance.

The first-generation WACs were typically formed in response to either a formal closure notice or, in a handful of cases, the spread of rumours denoting their possible demise. They were, in the main, spearheaded by unionised senior production workers and local community stakeholders concerned about the potential socio-economic impact of retrenchment. The principal tactic employed at larger fully-integrated iron and steelworks was, therefore, to lobby sympathetic senior industry figures at national level.

The most determined and arguably successful campaign in this experimental period was conducted by shop stewards at River Don. Large sections of the special steels plant were originally expected to shut as part of the Conservative's hiving-off policy, threatening 4,500 jobs. An action committee, which was dominated by AUEW convenors, launched their struggle in July 1971 with a boisterous rally through the cobble-stoned streets of Sheffield. Public donations were absorbed into a special Fighting Fund, which was used to cover the wages of a group of men planning a work-in. Thousands of local steelmen unanimously backed a resolution refusing to permit their new owners to enter the shop-floor, essentially occupying the site. Such militancy, nevertheless, was unique to South Yorkshire and the remaining WACs upheld the traditional conservatism long associated with domestic steelworkers.

The principal strategy employed by shop stewards was to participate in talks with senior industry officials, as per BSC's social policy provisions. Lord Melchett, keen to demonstrate that his organisation was willing to engage in meaningful consultation, agreed to delay the rundown of River Don, Shotton, Ebbw Vale, Shelton and Irlam. When announcing the decision to extend the lifespan of the latter by an additional three years, the industry press celebrated the effectiveness of BSC's consultative machinery:

Meaningful consultation is one of today's most overworked phrases. In many industries it means no more than management telling work people what it has decided. So it was not surprising that some steel workers and their union representatives regarded the Corporation's consultative machinery in respect of closures with scepticism. 'What is the point of consulting if management

has already made up its mind to effect a closure?', they asked. The news that the Irlam stage two proposals should therefore make them think again. This has been done entirely as a result of the consultations which have taken place between the management and the trade unions.¹⁰²

The impact the WACs had on management thinking at this preliminary stage was obvious, with the overall size of BSC's workforce falling by only 2,600 in 1972/3. This contrasted to the 16,400 jobs shed twelve months earlier at the behest of the Tory Government. Still, the success of these early campaigns should ultimately be measured by their leaders' ability to influence management's long-term strategic thinking. By earning a stay of execution, the onus was now on the men to persuade industry planners to invest in their doomed plants. To achieve this, they would need the support of their Executives.

In a bid to widen their sphere of influence, Welsh steelmen sought to establish a NAC. A summit of 90 delegates representing some 26 WACs met in Shotton days after the controversial ISTC conference:

[In May 1973] the rank and file national action committee at its second meeting in Manchester promised support for workers' sit-ins against closure and banned the re-direction of materials from works threatened with shutdown. There could be little doubt that the unofficial campaign found its origins in an alleged lack of action by union national leaderships.¹⁰³

¹⁰² *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 23 September 1971.

¹⁰³ Bowen, *Social Control*, pp. 159-160.

Attempts at organising a meaningful collaborative approach, however, were hindered by the TUCSICC's refusal to support what they considered to be a rival co-ordinating body. The NAC was, therefore, dead at conception. Meanwhile, steel union leaders tarnished their reputations further by refusing to formally back individual campaigns. Geoffrey Dudley has noted how the Shelton WAC was left stunned when, during a visit to the works, Davies refused to speak to any workers affiliated to a rival union.¹⁰⁴ At this stage, the ISTC leadership's attitude towards the first generation of action committees was predominantly driven by a desire to protect its central authority. Tony Cliff has identified how trade union bureaucrats seek to restrict the autonomy of rank and file members:

One thing that terrifies the trade union bureaucrats more than anything else is the independent actions of workers. Nothing is better calculated to cut down their importance, their status, their prestige. And nothing is more likely to strengthen their attachment to the status quo. That attachment is not straightforward. The trade union bureaucrat is not a capitalist, but he's not a worker either. He lives off class struggle, but he can't let it go beyond the point of mediation, or negotiation. His basic rule is to keep the contestants alive and able to fight – gently.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Dudley, *Pluralism, Policy Making*, p. 260.

¹⁰⁵ Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 106. With the relationship between rank and file members and union hierarchies becoming increasingly polarised, it was often left to sympathetic Divisional Officers to maintain links between headquarters and the regions.

Respective WAC leaders subsequently turned their attentions to preparing autogenous development proposals, the most successful of which was submitted by workers at River Don who persuaded Grosvenor Place to permanently shelve their rundown plans and invest in new machinery. Elsewhere, BSC agreed to install a new bar mill at Shelton, incorporating the plant's finishing end into their long-term plans.

Despite these two relatively minor victories, BSC still refused to deviate from the premise of the Ten Year Strategy. Having seen their counterproposals rejected, the remaining WACs were left with little option but adopt a watching brief. Still, hope was not entirely lost. With the Conservative Government in a state of near permanent crisis – and a revitalised opposition Labour Party vowing to review the Corporation's long-term development strategy – UK steelworkers approached the February 1974 general election contest with anticipation. They were joined by a group of shop stewards at Bilston who had established their own action committee.

The Origins of the BJUAC

Notwithstanding the systematic and deliberate marginalisation of their works, Bilston's steelmen performed admirably during the formative years of public ownership. In May 1970 melting shop operatives broke pre-nationalisation production records on two separate occasions.¹⁰⁶ With the help of Bilston, the Special Steels Division was by far the most profitable section of the industry, registering £31.2m in 1970/1; £10m in

¹⁰⁶ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, May 1970.

1971/2 and £20m in 1972/3.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, as BSC was hit by a surge in unofficial local strikes under the Conservative Party, local workers maintained their exemplary record of peaceful industrial relations. Unlike colleagues elsewhere, Bilston's steelmen also supported BSC's Green Book initiative by facilitating shift reductions that led to several partial de-manning schemes.¹⁰⁸ They exhibited a willingness to adapt production methods, successfully trialling a prototype of automated billet testing equipment that was subsequently adopted throughout the industry.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, owing to the skill and flexibility of finishing end employers, Bilston was able to manufacture round bars between 80mm and 350mm in diameter, the largest range of sizes produced in a steelworks outside the USSR.¹¹⁰

As the plant's production workers got on with the task of producing high-quality steel profitably, a small band of supervisory staff and middle-managers was becoming increasingly concerned by the behaviour of The Mount; and their decision to shelve the BEACON scheme in particular. Following the April 1971 rationalisation announcement, this informal group of 'staffers' met locally. Participating in the talks was Terry Hyde and Geoff Richards, leaders of the 66-strong ISTC Middle-Management branch. They were joined by Rail Traffic Manager, Frank Chaney, and

¹⁰⁷ JURUE, *The Future of Bilston Steelworks: An Appraisal*, March 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/4, p. 17. Although results for individual units were not published until 1973/4, Bilston was known to have functioned as a profitable concern during the intervening period.

¹⁰⁸ Some workers also agreed to drop their craft status.

¹⁰⁹ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 7 December 1972.

¹¹⁰ *The Steel News: Special Steels Division Edition*, 22 March 1973.

Blast Furnace Department boss, David Hunter – representing 80 SIMA-affiliated middle-managers.¹¹¹

Joining this middle-management team was a group of senior supervisors led by Reg Turley, the softly spoken Chairman of the plant's Joint Staff Branches Committee and an ISTC stalwart.¹¹² At his side was the likes of Colin Simpkins, Joe Clarke, David Hamilton, Ian Turner and Cecil Baines, a tight-knit team of joint branch officials who enjoyed a close working relationship. Turley's closest friend was Baines, a 47-year-old non-destructive testing supervisor from the laboratories. Like so many of his colleagues, he had long-established ancestral ties to the works, with his grandfather once employed by the Hickman family. The Secretary of the ISTC Technical Staff Branch had recently joined forces with Turley to form a charity organisation that sought to, "build a better future" for Bilston.¹¹³ Indeed, a common trait of these men was a passion for their hometown and, as such, they were primarily motivated by a concern for the social and economic well-being of future generations. Baines had grown up during the Great Depression and was still haunted by the experiences of a close family member who, as an unemployed ironworker, had been forced to suffer the indignity of working at the same 'Poverty Bonk' Benjamin Bilboe had protested:

¹¹¹ Chaney entered the industry as a shunter with Dorman Long in his native Redcar, before coming to Bilston as the Rail Traffic Section Manager in 1968. The popular Hunter had originally plied his trade at Normanby Park works in Scunthorpe, before moving to Bilston in June 1970. Since then he had become a popular figure, involving himself with a number of social activities. He was also known to serenade his men with his trusty bagpipes.

¹¹² Since joining the works in 1949, Turley had immersed himself in union business; becoming Secretary of the ISTC Staff Branch; Chairman of the BWB ISTC Joint Staff Branches; head of the combined works JCC; and a member of the Joint Staff Branches Negotiating Committee. At national level, he was elected to serve on the ISTC Staff Negotiating Committee.

¹¹³ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 29 March 1979.

He was a strong socialist and he was a man who wanted to work. The indignities he suffered because he could not find a settled job made me realise that no man should be put in that position. I resolved that if ever I could do anything to ensure it would not happen again I would do so.¹¹⁴

Hamilton, meanwhile, had recently established the 'Bilston Jobs Action Group', working alongside researchers at the University of Birmingham to produce a report exploring ways in which to attract new employers to the town. As the outspoken Chairman of the ISTC Security Branch, he earned the moniker of 'Little Leprechaun' owing to his diminutive stature and heavy Irish accent. Unlike his fellow shop stewards, Hamilton was a militant, anti-establishment figure who had joined the CPGB as a young man growing up in Northern Ireland. An enthusiastic reader of *The Morning Star*, he was also a vocal advocate of the growing 'right to work' movement, as outlined in a letter published in *The Steel News*:

My own opinion is that it is very difficult to ask 165,000 people on the dole to work harder, also we have approximately another 2,000,000 on short time. We have over 1,000,000 homeless people in England alone and the rest of us (working people) struggling to bring up families, pay mortgages and rents, and very high cost of food to feed ourselves. The people of Britain have always been prepared and done an honest day's work, but the employers have always resisted to the extreme paying them a fair day's wages. Steelworkers should know this when Dr. Monty Finniston wants to abandon 50,000 steelworkers to

¹¹⁴ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Works Edition*, 28 November 1975.

unemployment and much reduced living standards. I find it very hard to take any notice of people who live in palaces telling me and others like me to work harder and pull my belt tighter.¹¹⁵

The role that Bilston's senior supervisory staff and their middle-managers played in planting the first seeds of resistance contrasted with production worker colleagues, who were relatively slow to formally respond to the unfolding threat. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a clear manifestation of the industrial relations culture that had evolved under private ownership, with Bilston's manual grades traditionally exhibiting a reticence to self-organise.

This would change in February 1972, when Monty 'Finish 'em' Finniston arrived in Wolverhampton to speak to the annual dinner of the SISI. At the end of what was a characteristically self-aggrandising keynote speech, the Corporation's ideas man broke protocol by disclosing that Grosvenor Place was specifically looking to abandon Bilston by March 1975 at the latest. Alarmed by Finniston's startling admission – and facing the very-real prospect of receiving a formal 24-month closure notice by the end of the next financial year – local shop stewards scrambled into action. Responding to a request for clarification from the ISTC Joint Staff Branches, an unsympathetic Derek Saul refused to refute his Chief Executive's statement, adding:

Regarding his comments on steelmaking by the open-hearth process, it is common knowledge that steelmaking by this process is an obsolete technology and in consequence open-hearth furnaces only have a limited life.

¹¹⁵ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Works Edition*, 14 November 1975.

What Dr. Finniston said therefore about the eventual phasing out of this process should not have come as any great surprise ... You will appreciate that the Corporation as a whole cannot avoid continuing rationalisation if it is to meet world competition in steel, but the redundancies which are inevitably associated with this exercise are by no means lightly regarded.¹¹⁶

Frustrated by their unpopular General Manager's stance, Turley instinctively turned to union bureaucrats in London:

This statement made by Dr. Finniston at a private function, to me seems totally irresponsible, especially when there has been no prior consultation with the employees of these works. There has been a distinct feeling of depression and low morale at the Bilston Works for a considerable time due to the precarious state of the trade and rationalisation plans of BSC, therefore, remarks like this do nothing at all to help. Could I ask if you will take whatever action you consider necessary to safeguard the interest of the Confederation members at Bilston.¹¹⁷

The proud Confederation member was, nonetheless, left bemused by Dai Davies' ambivalence:

Although I can fully appreciate the likely effects of this statement on the morale of the operatives at the Bilston Works, I think it has to be conceded that it has

¹¹⁶ Letter from G. Saul to P. Watts, 7 March 1972, MRC, MSS.36/2000/282.

¹¹⁷ Letter from R. Turley to D. Davies, 23 February 1972, MRC, MSS.36/2000/282.

been generally understood that the advent and development of oxygen steelmaking would inevitably affect the continued operation of the open hearth practice. This trend is developing in every steel-producing country in the world, so that in making this statement Dr. Finniston was merely drawing attentions to an inescapable fact.¹¹⁸

The reaction was one of alarm, with the Bilston men issuing a damning statement:

This is what all the concern at Bilston is about, it is obvious even to the simple-minded that the future of Bilston is in the balance and that is why [*sic*] because we are paying members to an organisation which has for its first principle the safeguarding and protection of its members we are asking you as General Secretary to take action on our behalf. At the end of the discussion the following resolution was unanimously adopted: - "This Committee insists the General Secretary presses the BSC and the Secretary of Trade and Industry for its assurance that the Bilston Group of Works will be given the necessary development to enable it to carry on its role as the premier steelmaking works in the West Midlands. Further to this the Committee insists you visit the Bilston Works within the next 7 days to give the necessary help which should be forthcoming in exchange for the payment of dues".¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Letter from D. Davies to R. Turley, 25 February 1972, MRC, MSS.36/2000/282.

¹¹⁹ Letter from A. Taylor to D. Davies, 17 March 1972, MRC, MSS.36/2000/282.

However, the belligerent General Secretary, after ignoring the invite, alienated his Bilston members further by publicly acquiescing to management's rationalisation programme when attending a SISI talk in nearby Wolverhampton:

I would be failing in my duty if I did not say this: We will cooperate with all reasonable steps to make the British Steel Corporation efficient, and economically and commercially viable ...¹²⁰

A candid Hamilton accused Davies of, "showing a complete lack of ability and interest" in the plight of his colleagues, before criticising his Executive's pro-modernising agenda:

We feel that the General Secretary as head of our Union is not doing enough in the fight against closures in the Steel Industry. It is not his job to modernise the Steel Industry or to assist in this. It is his job to save our jobs. The Executive Council is showing a complete lack of ability and interest in the fight to save the Steel Industry, bearing in mind that the AEW [*sic*] Executive Council has issued a public statement that they will use all the resources of their Union to defend their members interest in the Steel Industry. We think the Executive Council should have confidence in the ability of the members to carry out this fight.¹²¹

¹²⁰ *The Express and Star*, 17 February 1973.

¹²¹ Letter from D. Hamilton to D. Davies, 3 May 1973, MRC, MSS.36/2000/258.

A war of words ensued, with the sharp-tongued Hamilton criticising his leader for accepting a knighthood from the Tory Government. Bilston's Head of Security eventually persuaded his fellow staffers to pass a formal vote of no confidence in Davies.¹²²

Shocked by their union leader's apathy, the men had little option but to look elsewhere for assistance. Many had maintained the plant's historically close relationship with the area's CLPs. Reg Turley, for example, was Chairman of the Springvale Ward of the Party and a leading member of Wolverhampton's South East CLP. Joining him was Ian Turner, who had recently been chosen as a future Labour Party candidate for the next round of Council elections. As political activists, they had developed a close relationship with MP for Bilston, Robert Edwards, who agreed to intervene on behalf of his concerned constituents.¹²³

Securing the backing of such an experienced politician was a real *coup de maitre* for Bilston's staffers. Born in Merseyside to dockworkers, he had joined the Co-operative Movement and the ILP as a teenager. The political activist rose through the ranks of the Party, joining a delegation of young socialists to Russia and leading an International Militia during the Spanish Civil War.¹²⁴ Firmly entrenched on the far left of the UK political scene, the Liverpoolian chaired the ILP between 1943 and 1948, before being elected as the Labour and Co-operative candidate for Bilston seven years

¹²² Letter from D. Hamilton to D. Davies, 8 May 1973, MRC, MSS.36/2000/258.

¹²³ Edwards was actively involved in Turley and Hamilton's community work, assisting with the formation of both the 'Bilston Action Group' and the 'Bilston Jobs Group'.

¹²⁴ During his trip to Moscow, the impressionable young political activist met Joseph Stalin, Vyacheslav Molotov, Bela Kun and his hero Leon Trotsky. In Spain he commanded the likes of George Orwell, Robert Smillie and Stafford 'Staff' Cottman.

later. Edwards brought to the table an incredible amount of organising experience. As a veteran of the trade union movement, he had served as a message carrier for the TUC in 1926, before moving to the U.S. to work alongside renowned labour leader John Lewis. Upon his return to the UK, he became General Secretary of the Chemical Workers Union and a National Officer for the TGWU. Edwards was also a seasoned campaigner, having led the Lancashire hunger marchers during the Great Depression. This experience had an obvious impact on his subsequent Parliamentary career. A passionate advocate of right to work campaigns, he frequently spoke out against the inherent evils of corporate greed and redundancy:

I suppose that I am the only hon. Member who has led an unemployment march on London. I did so in 1934 and was ejected from the Gallery for interrupting the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. I was disgusted at his wistful rhetoric which had no meaning for the 2½ million working people who were unemployed. Many millions feel today as I felt then ... In the 1930s, the consequences of large-scale unemployment across Europe led to the military dictatorship in Italy, the rise of Hitler and the military dictatorship in Germany and to the Second World War. Fundamentally, it arose out of our failure to maintain the dignity of our people by providing them with useful and constructive work. That shows how important this problem is. All the efforts of the Government, useful as they are, can be wiped out by a half a dozen multinational companies closing factories and moving them to Latin America, South Africa or other places where there are tax havens or where the workers are not organised in unions and pay is low ... The Bilston steel works in my constituency is threatened with closure, although it has never run at a loss. It

is still a profitable factory. I do not know why we allow private enterprise firms or nationalised organisations to close down factories that are viable and that supply local services to local industry and to the local community. Many factories are being wiped out in this way.¹²⁵

As this thesis will determine, the decade-long struggle to defend Bilston would be underpinned by Edwards' personal political doctrine and his influence in Whitehall:

Bob Edwards was tremendous ... The support he gave us, the places he got us into, the people he got us to meet ... He always used to meet us when we went to Parliament, he'd take us in, look after us.¹²⁶

With the MP now on board, a formal multi-union group representing all grades of worker was established. Elected officials from local ISTC, TGWU, SIMA, NUB and UCATT branches were absorbed into the BJUAC.¹²⁷ Adopting a more established operational model, David Hunter was made Secretary, with Reg Turley assuming the role of Vice-Chairman. Works Transport Controller, Dennis Turner, was confirmed as Chair. A well-known figure around Bilston, the 30-year-old had previously worked as a door-to-door salesman, a job that had introduced him to some of the most vulnerable members of society:

¹²⁵ 943 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1978) cols. 148-50.

¹²⁶ Oral testimony from G. Howe recorded 25 January 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

¹²⁷ Although the action committee was no longer the exclusive domain of ISTC or SIMA-affiliated staffers, at this relatively early stage they had a considerable influence over the body.

I really needed to make a lot of money very quickly, and since I'd always had an outgoing personality, to become a Betterware person was really right up my street. Because I love people and, I was able to meet a lot of people, and it gave me my first insight into people's problems, which was a very big encouragement to me to take up politics later. I became a member of the Labour Party when I was 16, and so I was a member of the Labour Party even when I was a Betterware man. I only did that for a couple of years, it's something that you do for all those experiences. I never did make any money out of it because I used to spend more time talking to people about their problems than getting on with the selling.¹²⁸

These experiences prompted Turner to become a community leader and champion of the common man, organising several charity drives that raised funds for a new citizens centre, youth club, theatre, women's refuge and homeless shelter. It was as an aspiring political activist that he first caught the eye of his would-be mentor Edwards. Having joined the Labour Party, he was elected as Youth Mayor of Bilston and the head of the town's Young Socialists. Whilst canvassing for the October 1964 general election, he formed a close relationship with the recently widowed MP. Moving permanently into his constituency home, the Bilston man would listen intently to his housemate's reminiscences of the General Strike and the Spanish Civil War. By the time of the March 1966 general election contest, Turner and his brother were acting as Edwards' official political agents, coordinating a highly successful campaign that extended the MP for Bilston's already substantial majority. Weeks later, the favour was returned as Edwards backed Turner's successful bid to become Wolverhampton's

¹²⁸ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, p. 2.

youngest-ever Councillor, representing a ward with a history of electing socialist candidates such as Benjamin Bilboe. The admiration the Bilstonian had for his mentor was revealed two decades later, when replacing him as MP for Wolverhampton South East:

I come to the House following a legend – the legend of Bob Edwards, who was a fine parliamentarian, and who devoted all his life to the interests of the people. If I can serve the people of my constituency one quarter as well as he did, I shall be very pleased. Bob Edwards made a wider contribution than that, from the days when he sat with Trotsky as a young man, and with Mao Tse Tung. He fought in the Spanish civil war. All that is known to the House. He is such a modest man. He served through the years with such humility. It is a great privilege to follow him. To have had him as a mentor over the past 20 years has been of great value to me.¹²⁹

As a Councillor, Turner threw himself into his casework and, by the time he assumed the leadership of the BJUAC, he was already chairing Wolverhampton's Policy and Humanities, General Purposes, Economic Development and Transport Committees.¹³⁰ Whilst nurturing his entry into mainstream electoral politics, Edwards also ensured his young apprentice fully immersed himself in the trade union movement. Initially volunteering as a pence card steward for the ISTC, Turner became

¹²⁹ 118 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1987) col. 698

¹³⁰ Turner had developed a close working relationship with a large network of local officials whose influence and professional expertise would prove crucial in the years ahead.

a senior convenor in the mills, before being nominated by Edwards as the Wolverhampton CLP's Trade Union Liaison Officer.

As a community organiser, political campaigner and public servant, the young steelworker had honed a variety of skills that would be integral to the struggle for jobs.¹³¹ Whilst possessing a considerable Black Country brogue, he was an accomplished and eloquent public speaker and could often be found on the campaign trail offering a rendition of The Red Flag whilst drumming up support for his fellow Labour Party candidates. Intellectually lucid and voracious, he would regularly bemuse his opponents by quoting long passages from the works of Robert Tressell or Omar Khayyam. When the battle for Bilston received a national platform, he began signing-off letters with a William Morris quote that reveals a conviction that everyone had the right to work:

It is right and necessary that all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing, and be of itself pleasant to do; and which should be done under such conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome nor over-anxious. Turn that claim about as I say, I think of it as long as I can, I cannot find that it is an exorbitant claim; yet again I say if Society would or could admit it, the face of the world would be ended. To feel that we were doing work useful to others and pleasant to ourselves, and that such work and its due reward could not fail

¹³¹ For an insight into Turner's upbringing, activism and entry into local politics see Reeves and Chevannes, *Real Labour*, pp. 11-56.

us! What serious harm could happen to us then? And the price to be paid for so making the world happy is Revolution.¹³²

Turner also possessed what E.P. Thompson described in his *Homage to Tom Maguire* as the “qualities of mass leadership”.¹³³ A blue-sky thinker with an imperious self-belief, his undaunted sense of optimism and personal magnetism commanded the extreme loyalty of his many followers:

I met Dennis probably about '73 or '74, he was working in the Transport Department at the bottom end of the Finishing and I was working A point, B point, C point ... I got to know the guy like that [crosses fingers] ... What I know of Dennis ... it was very much about camaraderie, people, fairness. He certainly wouldn't want big business to dictate how we live our lives. A very, very fair man, very open and honest man. Because he struggled with his breathing, Dennis did, and if he was on a roll because someone had really wound him up, he would say it and say and say it – “That isn't true, that isn't right, that's not how it should be”; and he'd be out of breath, you could hear it. So passionate! ... He was a political animal, it was his world ... I know his father was a trade union type guy, so he was steeped in it. And [of course] he was very close to Bob Edwards, the MP. So, it was very much about this tradition – the working man!¹³⁴

¹³² BJUAC, *The Bilston Dimension*, undated, ITSOE, BCA1/3.

¹³³ Thompson, *Homage*, p. 161.

¹³⁴ Oral testimony from P. Winmill recorded 16 March 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

Another quality was his ability to persuade and cajole, having developed powers of personal communication whilst working as Edwards' political agent. In addition to his drive and verve, he was a leader of some imagination who possessed a penchant for the theatrical – as demonstrated when he audaciously hijacked his union's ADC in June 1978 or when he led a works takeover in February 1979. Above everything, Turner was a pragmatist and a shrewd operator with sound logic, often adapting the BJUAC's defence strategy according to changing political, economic and industrial landscapes.¹³⁵

Evidently concerned by their colleagues' previous interactions with Dai Davies, the men bypassed Congress House altogether and instead recruited a team of influential political stakeholders to do their bidding. In doing so, they demonstrated an awareness that any fight for jobs would need to be political in nature – a strategy advocated by Richard Hyman:

Just as growing numbers of workers appreciate that the fight for employment cannot be resolved on an individual level ... so there is increasing awareness that sectional competition is also ineffectual: that the issue is a political one which must be pursued at a national level.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ For now, the positions of Chair and Vice-Chair were largely symbolic, with the BJUAC adopting a horizontal organisational model. Policymaking was established on democratic lines, with resolutions authorised by each union branch. If the opportunity arose, the action committee would call a mass meeting of available workers, who would be asked to back them any major strategic decision with a show of hands.

¹³⁶ R. Hyman, *Industrial Relations: a Marxist Approach* (London, 1975), p. 182.

At a subsequent meeting with the West Midlands Labour Party, MPs Renee Short, John Gilbert and Peter Archer each agreed to exert political pressure on the Corporation and the Conservative Government to reveal their long-term plans for Bilston. In Parliament, MP for Wolverhampton North East and NEC member, Short, tabled a written question to John Davies, asking him to confirm any planned compulsory redundancies.¹³⁷ The Minister's Parliamentary Undersecretary, Nicholas Ridley, provided a pre-determined stock answer, explaining the reasoning behind the decision to jettison OH facilities. In an act of political self-preservation synonymous with the Heath Government, Ridley deflected responsibility by explaining that any decision on the future of individual works was, "entirely the responsibility of the BSC".¹³⁸

Unsatisfied, Bilston's new political lobby went straight to the top, bombarding Grosvenor Place with a flurry of correspondence. The letter writing campaign was somewhat effective, with Lord Melchett personally looking to appease their concerns:

As I am sure you are aware, the Corporation has embarked upon extensive measures to modernise its plant with a view to preparing itself to compete effectively at home and abroad. These measures involve considerable degrees of rationalisation, including the need to dispense with the high cost and technologically obsolete open-hearth furnaces for steelmaking and to replace these with the most modern ironmaking facilities and basic oxygen convertors and/or electric arc furnaces. It was with this in mind that Dr. Finniston was

¹³⁷ Letter from R. Short to D. Hunter, 27 March 1972, ITSOE, BCA1/1.

¹³⁸ Letter from N. Ridley to R. Edwards, 10 March 1972, ITSOE, BCA1/1.

speaking when addressing the Staffordshire Iron and Steel Institute Annual Dinner on 18th February. To this extent there must be a question mark over the iron and steel making facilities at Bilston, as has been explained to the workforce there.¹³⁹

This well-meaning yet clumsy attempt to clarify the controversial Finniston speech raised more questions than answers. Gilbert, who also held concerns over the possible closure of a small BSC site in his Dudley constituency, protested by rejecting a personal invite to attend a black-tie event at industry headquarters:

I ought to tell you that, in general, I do not approve of public money being spent on political entertaining ... As, moreover, many of my constituents are facing redundancy as a result of the Corporation's announced decision to cut back on the Cookley Complex, and as hundreds more are faced, with their families, with great anxiety as to the future security of their jobs at the Birchley and Bilston plants, my wife and I regret that we do not feel that we have anything to celebrate with the senior management of the British Steel Corporation at this time.¹⁴⁰

Meanwhile, Bilston's convenors and their new Westminster allies concerned themselves with forcing policymakers to prematurely reveal their plans for mini-works. BJUAC Secretary, David Hunter, penned an astonishingly vitriolic letter to Finniston:

¹³⁹ Letter from J. Melchett to R. Edwards, 26 April 1972, ITSOE, BCA1/1.

¹⁴⁰ Letter from J. Gilbert to J. Melchett, 14 June 1972, ITSOE, BCA1/1.

I have, on behalf of the committee and workpeople of these works, some comments to make on the case for mini-steel works and on the regrettable tardiness that the British Steel Corporation have shown in taking it up ... Now however, the private sector of the Steel Industry has jumped on the bandwagon proposing mini works in the West Midlands, Chesterfield and Manchester. The proposed Cooper Lloyds Ltd., development in the West Midlands is a particularly bitter pill, inasmuch as it is very similar to the BEACON scheme, albeit on a somewhat smaller scale than envisaged at the Bilston Works. Should the B.S.C. allow these private sector developments to go forward unopposed, then in effect some of the B.S.C. [sic] most profitable business will have been hived off. Workpeople in many of the older long established (though often profitable) works will be thrown out of employment. It would be a tragedy for this to happen merely because of the tardiness of the B.S.C. heads to recognise the economic value of the mini-works concept.¹⁴¹

A busy Edwards also took up the issue in Parliament:

I have been making some inquiries about what is happening in the steel industry in America and in the steel industry in Germany. I discover from my trade union friends that in those countries they are moving away from the great mass-production steel factories and developing mini-steel factories catering for local demand. They are moving away from the whole concept of mass production in large massive factories towards mini production in the two major steel-producing countries of the world, America and Germany. This development is

¹⁴¹ Letter from D. Hunter to M. Finniston, 20 June 1972, ITSOE, BCA1/6.

taking place based upon experience. I hope that we are not going to have to learn this lesson based on our bitter experience by closing down establishments like this ... We just do not understand the policy of the British Steel Corporation. We do not accept that the Corporation has complete autonomy to run the business as it likes, when people's jobs are being put in jeopardy in the Black Country, where every day we hear of redundancies and of small factories closing down in the very heart of Britain. The Black Country, the West Midlands, is the strong arm of Britain. The Industrial Revolution started there. It cradled the iron and steel industry; it cradled coal production; and it cradled great engineering work. The whole area is now threatened, in our opinion, with very serious redundancies, and we believe that one of the contributory factors in that is the policy of the Corporation. Steel is the barometer of British industry and of Britain's future, and that is what troubles us today.¹⁴²

Back in the Black Country, manual grades and middle-management worked alongside a talented furnace-hand to develop a revolutionary new steelmaking process that extended the lifespan of OH furnaces. The 'double-ended firing' system involved blasting oxygen during smelting and, following a series of provisional tests, proved to dramatically reduce production times and, therefore, costs per unit. However, neither Swinton House nor Grosvenor Place showed any interest in the technique as it challenged the basic premise of the industry's long-term development strategy – and with it guarantees of billions of pounds of capital investment.

¹⁴² 842 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1972) cols. 1824-28.

The Bilston men and their allies, therefore, looked to launch an all-encompassing, top-level campaign involving the press, the regional labour movement and the wider community. In April 1973, a mass meeting was called at the plant. Responding to a rousing speech from Turner, hundreds of steelmen enthusiastically backed the action committee leader's call to resist any prospective rundown.¹⁴³ The meeting sent a clear message to the outside world: the BJUAC had secured a mandate to defend the livelihoods of approximately 3,000 workers. Early, popular support for the anti-closure campaign can primarily be explained by an occupational collectivism that was directly linked to the very nature of steelwork itself. Firstly, a clear sense of pride was engendered by participating in the manufacture of high quality, specialist steel, as outlined by BJUAC supporter John Vincent:

When you did a job, you got a self-satisfaction, you know. You'd contributed, you'd done something. And I think that's why people that stopped there really liked it. I mean, when we used to go on courses, they used to say we were arrogant at Bilston, because we considered ourselves to be the best, and we were trained the best.¹⁴⁴

Secondly, this pronounced occupational identity was further enhanced by the dangers of hot metal production:

There was one death ... whilst I was there. One of the shunters, he was coming out of the loading bay and his sock must have been caught, you know, in the

¹⁴³ In a further move to legitimise the authority of BJUAC, its members were chosen by their respective branches.

¹⁴⁴ Oral testimony from J. Vincent, recorded 15 October 2014, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

[train] wheels. It dragged him along and killed him. I remember that because at the time I was 18, I'd have been on days labouring, and I had to clean the mess up. So that stuck with me.¹⁴⁵

[There] was a chap called Sid Fellows, he had his arm chopped off. The ganniston on the blast furnace was ... after the blast furnace was tapped, the tapping hole was blocked off with a plug of ganniston, which is like clay, and it was put into place by the ganniston gun which basically a barrel with a piston sliding down pushing the ganniston out of the end into the tap hole. But the chap I'm on about, he was a maintenance man. He'd put his safety card on, his danger card ... whenever you were doing work on any machines you used to put a danger card on, and a danger card could not be moved by anybody else except the man who'd put it there ... he'd put his danger card on, he'd done everything right, and he was working with his arm inside the ganniston gun, and somebody started it up, and it pushed his arm ... cut his arm off, I think just below the elbow. But it pushed his arm out of the end of the ganniston gun, it dropped on the floor, obviously, and he picked it up, and walked down the ramp, and went into the medical centre, with his arm in his hand. And he waited there until the nurse came out, he didn't even go in screaming or anything like that. And he was taking a walk of probably 200 yards.¹⁴⁶

Former Welfare Officer, Andree Hickey, describes how this manifested itself into a heightened sense of shop-floor solidarity:

¹⁴⁵ Oral testimony from J. Boulton, recorded 15 October 2014, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

¹⁴⁶ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, pp. 32-33.

Everyone was so friendly to everybody. It was one big family; and if anyone was ill or had an injury, you can't imagine how many people used to collar me around the works. If they saw me walking around or if I was in the works car, they'd flag the car down: "What's happening to so-and-so", you know. They all wanted to know. It was a very close community.¹⁴⁷

Another factor in explaining widespread solidaristic action was a discernible camaraderie that had resulted from sectional working and the continental shift pattern:

... the lovely part of the steelworks, as anyone will tell you, it's a village. It's a wholly contained community of people, and because you work on a continental rota, you spend more time, effectively, with your work colleagues than you do with your family. And the place operated like that; the workmen's canteen, the beer flowed ... So it was a real home from home in a sense ... works colleagues became somewhat closer and more familiar in terms of living together. So that was my perception of the steelworks, was one of very wholesome sort of extended family living, and there was great partnership and great comradeship amongst people.¹⁴⁸

You were part of a family. It was a home away from home because you spent weekends, you know. I mean, the first two years I was there I spent working Christmas day because we let the married men with children go and have their

¹⁴⁷ Oral testimony from A. Hickey, recorded 15 October 2014, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

¹⁴⁸ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, pp. 5-6.

Christmas. And us single blokes, who weren't bothered, you know, we went [in]. That's how it was, give and take, people looked after one another.¹⁴⁹

I mean, I've got to say, if you wanted anything doing, or you wanted anything, somewhere on the steelworks there was someone who could do it. If you wanted your hair cut, you had your hair cut, if you wanted a packet of cigarettes, if you wanted to put a bet on they were all over the place, if you wanted a washing machine, if you wanted tyres, no problem, and that's the way it was. I mean, it was a thriving community within the works.¹⁵⁰

These and other factors would underwrite the popularity of the campaign for several years. Assured of their support base, Turner and his colleagues immediately informed WMBC, the West Midlands Labour Party and the WB&DTUC of the nature of their campaign, before co-authoring a detailed press release with members of Edwards' administrative team. The issues around which the Bilston men initially intended to defend the works included: its ongoing profitability; returns on capital previously employed; the inherent flaws of management's development strategy; and the potential of double-ended firing.¹⁵¹

But before the first shots of what would be a protracted fight for survival could be fired, Turner and Turley were invited to an unscheduled meeting in Sheffield. There they were handed a prepared written statement outlining the Corporation's updated plans for Bilston. Under sustained political pressure – and in light of its ongoing profitability

¹⁴⁹ Oral testimony from J. Vincent, recorded 15 October 2014, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

¹⁵⁰ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, pp. 33-34.

¹⁵¹ Letter from R. Edwards to R. Turley, 5 April 1973, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

– management had decided to absorb the plant into the industry’s new medium-term operating plan, thus guaranteeing a future of at least five years. Hearing the news, Edwards and the BJUAC decided against activating the campaign and to instead adopt watching brief. They agreed that, “... in light of this statement it would be folly to overplay or expose our hand too much at the present time, but we feel an occasional dig at this Tory dominated public sector will do no harm”.¹⁵² Meanwhile, their political patron offered an assurance, “We should have a general election within the next two years, and Labour should have no difficulty in becoming the Government and this will mean the cancellation of all recommended closures”.¹⁵³ As the next chapter will ascertain, only one of these forecasts would hold true.

Conclusion

Despite a promising start, whereby their conditions of employment were dramatically improved, Bilston’s early experiences of public ownership were mostly negative, with their unfashionable plant being systematically marginalised by management. Implementing the first phase of a decade-long rundown process, an explicitly biased divisional management employed a series of discriminatory trading practices designed to safeguard works in South Yorkshire at the expense of Bilston. The plant’s long-term prospects were further undermined by planner’s ill-fated decision to relocate all domestic iron and steelmaking to a handful of sites; an industrial renewal strategy that was fundamentally flawed. By acceding to management prerogative, both the Labour and Conservative Governments failed to properly probe the rationale behind the

¹⁵² Letter from R. Turley to R. Edwards, 15 May 1973, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

¹⁵³ Letter from R. Edwards to R. Turley, 23 May 1973, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

'bigger is better' approach to renewal. Neither did the pro-establishment steel unions, whose stringent modernising agenda obliged structural rationalisation through compulsory mass redundancies and the closure of all fully-integrated inland works, regardless of performance.

It has been established how executive responses to pre-crisis closure proposals were woefully inadequate. By adopting an inflexible and ultimately futile 'alternative jobs posture', the steel unions, led by an apathetic Dai Davies, meekly complied with management, effectively sacrificing large swathes of their membership in exchange for the promise of investment in the Big Five.

This policy of acquiescence placed the burden of responsibility on steelworkers, many of whom responded to their leaders' ambivalence by establishing ad-hoc protest groups known as action committees. At Bilston, the plant's traditionally passive workers formed the first incarnation of the BJUAC, a multi-union grassroots protest group. Led by community activist, steelworker and Councillor, Dennis Turner, and political patron, MP Bob Edwards, the new action committee set its strategic stall out early. Enlisting the support of a cross-party network of influential regional political figures and community stakeholders, they were able to successfully lobby sympathetic policymakers into adding the Black Country plant to their updated medium-term operating plan.

The BJUAC's principal argument for retention was their plant's ongoing profitability, which was based, in part, on the facility's ability to produce its own pig iron. The next chapter will demonstrate how management, responding to an unprecedented world

steel crisis, abused established consultation apparatus and local steelmen's goodwill to forcibly mothball Elisabeth. It is revealed how the unilateral move signified a deliberate attack on the Black Country plant's profitability and the very basis of the action committee's successful defence strategy.

Chapter 4: The Mothballing of Elisabeth

This chapter provides a review of initial responses to an economic crisis that would engulf BSC for over a decade. It begins with a brief assessment of the new Labour Government's policy towards state steel. Having denounced the previous ministry's role in expediting the rationalisation of traditional steelworks, Harold Wilson ordered the temporary delay of all closures proposed under the Ten Year Strategy. The impact of the Government's political intervention on the prospects of Bilston is assessed, as is the collapse of the trade in mid-1975.

It is revealed how a hostile senior management team, headed by new BSC Chairman Sir Monty 'Finish 'em' Finniston, responded to the escalating crisis by cynically shifting the blame for its own deficiencies on ordinary workers. The chapter dissects union reactions to Finniston's advanced rationalisation plan, demonstrating how recently appointed TUCSICC and ISTC leader, Bill Sirs, yielded to management's false narrative by signing damaging national productivity agreements.

The conduct of Bilston's assiduous steelmen is measured, with the shop-floor readily adapting workplace practices in order to successfully protect their plant's proud tradition of profitability. They were justly rewarded when yet another new BSC chief, the seemingly more progressive Sir Charles Villiers, absorbed the plant into his updated medium-term strategy. However, Bilston's future was again put into doubt as the crisis returned following a brief respite. With the Corporation's precarious financial situation deteriorating, management looked to use the aforementioned productivity deals to rundown older facilities by transferring more and more orders to those sites safeguarded by the Ten Year Strategy.

The chapter details the effect this had on Bilston. In a move that was described by trade union leaders as one of the “dirtiest tricks” ever played on the nation’s steelworkers, BSC abused established consultation machinery to permanently mothball the plant’s blast furnace.¹ The impact this insidious move had on the plant’s viability is investigated, as is the strategic response of the BJUAC.

The World Steel Crisis

Whilst in opposition, Labour had committed itself to an industrial strategy that sought to intensify state intervention. An undertaking to review management’s rationalisation programme was confirmed in ‘Labour’s Programme’, a political manifesto vowing to bring, “new life and hope to the traditional steel communities”.² After the February 1974 election victory, new Industry Minister Tony Benn enthusiastically ordered a tripartite review of the Ten Year Strategy to be headed by Labour peer Lord Frank Beswick. In what was a reminder to management of their statutory social responsibilities, the former Minister for Technology ordered new BSC chief Monty Finniston to delay all planned closures (excluding Irlam) for two to four years.³ In the case of Glengarnock and Shelton, new steelmaking technology was promised, a decision lauded by party officials as a remarkable example of meaningful consultation.

¹ Sirs, *Hard Labour*, p. 66.

² The Labour Party, *Labour’s Programme* (London, 1974), p. 31.

³ Finniston became BSC Chairman in June 1973, following the untimely death of his predecessor. Despite Melchett’s many commercial failings, his loss was mourned by employees who had come to appreciate his enlightened approach. His replacement, on the other hand, had already developed a reputation for being an abrasive figure who revelled in confrontation. Sir Monty and his new Chief Executive Robert Scholey would soon form a terrifying duo.

Notwithstanding these two pardons, the Beswick Review was little more than a political compromise designed to reconcile rationalisation with its duty to traditional working-class steel communities.⁴ Although well-intentioned, the decision to focus on the social consequences of the previous Government's modernisation plan meant that an opportunity to address its inherent technical and commercial flaws was completely missed.⁵

When the results of the Review were announced in Parliament in February 1975, there was one notable omission. Despite originally being incorporated by Benn, Bilston was withdrawn following yet another personal intervention by Bob Edwards. In December 1974, the re-elected MP for the new constituency of Wolverhampton South East travelled to Whitehall alongside Chair of the Parliamentary Steel Committee, Geoffrey de Freitas; and NEC member, Renee Short, for talks with Benn and Beswick. Edwards, who enjoyed a close personal relationship with a Labour peer he had commanded in Spain, swayed the argument by directing discussions to Bilston's profitable record, as well as the potential social and economic implications of closure to his constituency.⁶ Following the talks, Benn informed a frustrated Grosvenor Place that the facility was to be included in the Corporation's recently updated medium-term

⁴ In a damning critique, Cottrell described the Beswick Review as an "election gimmick", see Cottrell, *The Giant*, p. 58.

⁵ J.J. Richardson and G.F. Dudley revealed that, by not radically altering the strategy, the Government was anxious not to alienate management by further delaying the long-awaited development of the Big Five. See Richardson and Dudley, *Steel Policy*, p. 334.

⁶ All five Labour officials shared similar political outlooks, occupying the left of the party. Benn and Edwards, in particular, were kindred spirits: institutional outsiders whom had developed an uneasy relationship with members of their own Government.

strategy, covering the period 1975/80. In what would prove to be an extremely optimistic appraisal of the situation, an enthusiastic Edwards declared:

The works now have a long future. The Government is so confident about the works that it is investing new capital into them ... This is great news for the 3,000 workers – particularly as under the Tory Government it was scheduled for closure. We have stopped this by proving this plant is a viable steel works.⁷

A month later, the popular MP spoke to local workers, further raising the possibility of lifesaving investment. Shop-floor hopes were heightened when new BSC Deputy Chairman Bob Scholey arrived days later for a Works Council meeting. Confirming that their livelihoods were secure until the end of the current decade at least, he suggested Bilston could fulfil a long-term role processing orders overlooked by bulk steelmaking facilities:

The new billet mills planned for Redcar would be high capacity units and their final markets have not been definitely defined. Bilston, being located in the Midlands area where markets for special billets in sizes and quantities which large plants might not find attractive, could give advantages to Bilston, upon he did not wish to further elaborate.⁸

⁷ *The Express and Star*, 18 January 1975.

⁸ Minutes of Bilston Works Council meeting, 13 February 1975, WCA, DW-173/1/1. Scholey personally assured Reg Turley that his works would figure somewhere in the long-term development plan; adding he was constantly recommending the installation of an electric arc furnace to his boss.

For the second time in the space of two years, Bilston's future appeared to have been safeguarded by their Westminster allies. However, whilst the men celebrated the news, they failed to realise that their exclusion had worked to their disadvantage. As was the case with Shelton and Glengarnock, Bilston possessed a powerful claim for investment. Its experienced workforce, with the support of local authority officials, could have used the review to showcase the impressive BEACON scheme to sympathetic Whitehall figures. Whilst colleagues elsewhere were at least afforded the opportunity to present their case for development, Bilston was instead handed what proved to be little more than a temporary release from the straitjacket.

The return of a Labour Government had coincided with an extended period of prosperity, with the Corporation enjoying record sales turnover following the February 1974 election. Nevertheless, during the final quarter of the 1974/5 financial year, the industry was consumed by a worsening order situation. As inflationary pressure took hold, costs of production also skyrocketed. Accounts reveal BSC barely broke-even in the second half of the financial year. Moreover, Grosvenor Place warned that indications for 1975/76 were "discouraging", with the industry facing the prospect of massive additional financial losses.⁹ By July 1975 sales had indeed plummeted to 0.26m tonnes per week, representing a staggering 33.3 per cent drop from the previous year and the lowest for a quarter century.¹⁰

Whilst the Corporation's public relations machine looked to blame the industry's failings on the Beswick Review, it is evident that, under Sir Monty's stewardship, its

⁹ BSC, *Annual Report and Accounts 1974/5* (London, 1975), p. 5.

¹⁰ *Man and Metal*, September 1975.

overall commercial performance deteriorated badly. As an engineer with little sales experience, Finniston failed to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the unexpected discovery of North Sea Oil, with Grosvenor Place refusing to tender for some £1.2bn worth of public contracts.¹¹ With widespread concerns over quality and delivery times, the likes of British Leyland, GKN and Ford turned their backs on the Corporation altogether by diversifying their supply chains.

As his organisation's financial situation became ever more perilous, Sir Monty sought to secure extensive labour cost savings at the so-called Beswick plants. To deflect attention away from his own failings, the BSC Chairman repeatedly used the national press to advocate the need to cut manning levels by way of compulsory redundancies:

We are in a difficult recession which is not confined to the steel industry. Quite undoubtedly this has an effect on the manpower we have to employ in getting steel out which is not wanted. I think inevitably, some people will be laid off.¹²

In April 1975, he sent shockwaves through the industry by revealing plans to shed 20,000 jobs over the coming twelve months.¹³ This move caused outrage in Westminster, forcing Benn to once again intervene.

¹¹ Astonishingly, these contracts were eventually awarded to rival steel producers in Italy and Japan.

¹² *The Times*, 11 April 1975.

¹³ The plan called for the closure of heavy-ends at Clyde Iron, Clydesbridge and Ebbw Vale and Shotton, as well as reduced operations at the likes of Shelton, East Moors, Teesside and Workington. As a profitmaking concern with a healthy orderbook, Bilston was excluded from the proposals at this early stage.

The TUCSICC was now led by Bill Sirs, whose appointment as ISTC chief only weeks earlier was intended to represent a change in trajectory for an organisation that, under his predecessor, had displayed a *de facto* acceptance of rationalisation. A former crane driver, Sirs had impressed rank and file steelworkers when speaking about his own experiences of unemployment and poverty in his native Hartlepool. Significantly, as a Divisional Officer, he had accused his EC of not doing enough to prevent retrenchment:

In 1970 I moved to Cheshire to cover that county, Lancashire and North Wales. While I was in Cheshire I came face to face with something that was to haunt me for years to come: a works closure. The works was Irlam in Lancashire and although we fought for the plant we were very much on our own. I shall never forget the look on the faces of the workforce as they filed out of the Irlam gates for the last time ... But looking back at the Irlam experience, I must admit that sometimes trade union hierarchies are also pretty hard to move. When I attended the ISTC Executive to plead for action to defend the plant, warning that if we did not make a stand we would lose one works after another. I was told by the then general secretary Dai Davies, 'OK, Brother Sirs, you can go back to Irlam and tell them you've made your speech!'¹⁴

Unlike his predecessor, he publicly recognised the legitimacy of the WACs. If Davies was yesterday's man, Sirs presented himself as the future – a progressive who sought to modernise an industrial union that had become increasingly archaic. Upon taking

¹⁴ Sirs, *Hard Labour*, pp. 52-53.

office in May 1975, a supremely confident Sirs set out his stall by firing a warning shot to management:

The age of the employer's prerogative is over. Investment decisions which result in large or even small scale redundancies can no longer be made unilaterally by industrial entrepreneurs ... This right of workers to be taken into consideration when investment decisions which profoundly affect them are being contemplated is a moral one. But where industrialists refuse to recognize it, a degree of trade union strength may be necessary to enforce it – without implying that might is right. Responsible workers will not abuse their power by halting technological progress so long as it can be demonstrated that technology will not destroy the industrial and social lives of the workers.¹⁵

Benn, whose sympathies clearly lay with the unions, handed Finniston a public dressing-down, before ordering him to sit with Steel Committee officials and discuss mutually acceptable ways in which to tackle the crisis. Following ten hours of talks, the two parties struck a compromise deal. In exchange for management dropping their original de-manning target, the unions agreed to a five-point cost-cutting plan known as the May 1975 agreement:

- voluntary redundancies at works where over-manning was acknowledged by local union officials;
- the elimination of all unnecessary overtime working;
- a reduction in absenteeism;

¹⁵ *The Times*, 19 May 1975.

- more flexibility for the Corporation to determine levels of loading at Beswick plants;
- and the rigorous control of all future recruitment.

In a spirit of cooperation that obscured any animosity that may have previously developed on the shop-floor, Bilston's steelmen enthusiastically and conscientiously embraced the challenges set before them. Local shop stewards answered calls to reduce labour costs, with sectional JWPs established across the works. In the Transport Department, TGWU convenors worked alongside management to reorganise the rail-traffic section.¹⁶ ISTC-affiliated branch officials oversaw a revamp of the mills, reducing the section to a 15-shift operation that also boosted production by 700 tonnes per shift.¹⁷ As the 1975 summer shutdown approached, some of Bilston's steelmen agreed to take an extended, unpaid two-day holiday.

These initiatives were all part of a wider cost reduction programme, with local workers ensuring every possible economy was achieved. The Works Council, for example, introduced an ideas scheme that reduced annual costs by £160,000.¹⁸ One former steelworker remembers his colleagues enthusiastically embracing this new era of austerity:

Although it took a colossal effort from every single worker, in many ways it came natural to us. We had always been the sort of plant that did better than

¹⁶ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 3 October 1975.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 20 June 1975.

most in a recession. Whilst others were struggling, we knew how to step up to the plate.¹⁹

Energy and fuel bills were also tackled, with a unique 'Sammy Save It' poster campaign encouraging employees to 'SAVE POWER. SWITCH-OFF'.²⁰ In another moneysaving scheme, UCATT convenors sourced free refractory bricks from obsolete BSC plants in North Wales. Elisabeth's blast furnacemen made the greatest financial contribution. The decision to abandon the use of oil and higher-cost burden saved management an impressive £0.35m p/a.²¹

In the works offices, the commercial team looked to compensate for the loss of orders re-routed to South Yorkshire. Firstly, they exploited their intimate relationship with Black Country steel users, offloading unwanted material that had been sitting in the stockyard since the slump began.²² Secondly, they attacked emerging markets outside their traditional stronghold. In October 1975, the Sales Department secured a lucrative monthly contract supplying octagonal tubes to North Sea Oil.²³ Bilston also established itself as a leading exporter, with semi-finished steel sold to America, Australia, Europe, India and the Middle East. By March 1976, approximately 19,000 tonnes had been dispatched overseas, generating an additional £1.6m p/a in sales.²⁴

¹⁹ Oral testimony from anonymous, recorded 15 April 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

²⁰ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 14 November 1975.

²¹ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 16 January 1976.

²² Some 7,500 tonnes of dead stock were sold by a team that included Dennis Turner. As a stock-taker and former door-to-door salesman, the BJUAC leader used all of his commercial experience to convince local steel users to purchase the surplus material. See *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 28 November 1975.

²³ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 14 November 1975.

²⁴ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 12 March 1976.

In order to penetrate these markets even further, Bilston's flexible and highly skilled workforce produced an entirely new range of specialist products, expanding its portfolio to over 500 items. An innovative carbon-free cutting steel was delivered to British Leyland, a company which had previously complained about the unreliability of steel produced elsewhere in BSC. Bilston was also made an approved MOD supplier, enabling the works to secure additional Government contracts. Finally, the plant became a pioneer in the manufacture of 'super jumbo rounds', at the time the largest cylindrical metal bars in the world.²⁵

As new and unfamiliar orders came flooding in, the men responded in kind. In June 1975 local millmen smashed their shift output record by producing 1,253 tonnes. Days later, melting shop workers achieved a record average hourly output of 16.56 tonnes.²⁶ Bilston's steelmen knew the key to maintaining a high-level of profitability, particularly in a shrinking market, lay in pleasing the customer. One particular study revealed a rejection rate during this period of only 2.3 per cent and a successful delivery rate of 94 per cent on all domestic orders.²⁷ A duty to supply their loyal customers was also the principal reason for Bilston's NUB members defying national orders to strike in solidarity with colleagues at Llanwern. Ignoring threats of expulsion, the plant's 120 blast furnacemen remained at work for the entire stoppage. A further example of their diligence was demonstrated when a mechanical fault threatening ironmaking:

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 18 August 1975.

²⁷ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 22 April 1977.

[One] of the blast furnace blowers went down, and I'd worked on turbines at one time, and so they asked me if I'd go in and help in the turbine house, the blower house. This is the air that blows into the blast furnace – there were two, but one had gone down big time; the blades had broken off, massive thing ... we re-bladed the turbines, A1 turbine. And we worked, believe it or not; we were working 120 hours a week, that was worked hours. We were sleeping there, food was brought to us, and all we did was work, for 18 hours a day, and we grabbed a bit of sleep when we could, until the job was done ... I did that for a month.²⁸

The men's performance didn't go unnoticed, with a senior BSC official praising his employees, "The understanding they [the men] have shown of our economic situation has been better, I believe, than anywhere else within the Corporation – due to sensible people working together".²⁹ Such pliability is a testimony to the assiduity of British steelmen, as identified by Peter Bowen in *Social Control*:

The steelworker responds to what has gone before; he stands within the tradition of steelmaking. But he possesses the capability to change that tradition. The impetus to change is rooted in his occupational experience. It is this experience above all which creates for him what is real and what is unreal. Men respond to their situations but they may also re-create them.³⁰

²⁸ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, p. 23.

²⁹ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 14 November 1975.

³⁰ Bowen, *Social Control*, p. 21.

Six months on from the May 1975 agreement, BSC employees had secured management cost savings of £76m. Yet this still wasn't enough to turnaround the industry's deteriorating financial performance. In November 1975, Grosvenor Place revealed a record-breaking deficit of £125m for the first six months of the financial year. With an additional £200m loss expected for the remainder of 1975/6, management would now place incredible pressure on the unions to make further sacrifices.³¹

Tempering the Truth

Frustrated by perceived Government interference in their rationalisation plans, senior industry officials reacted by constructing a false narrative that blamed production workers and the unions for BSC's worsening financial situation. Following the May 1975 agreement, a series of press releases bemoaned labour efficiency rates at older facilities.³² Repeatedly referring to unfavourable international comparisons, the Corporation conveniently ignored the fact that foreign steel companies routinely adopted a system of measurement that excluded non-manual grades. Conversely, UK management doctored their own figures by including ancillary workers such as apprentices, medical staff, cleaners and canteen workers.³³ The domestic steel industry was by no means the most efficient by international standards, but any prevailing concerns were offset by one of the lowest wage bills in Western Europe.

³¹ The eventual overall loss for 1975/6 was £246m. This contrasted to a £3.1m profit at Bilston.

³² The overmanning myth was enthusiastically disseminated by a servile right-wing press. During the 1980 national strike one newspaper headline claimed, "Output per man is 866 in Japan, but in Britain it is 141". See *The Times*, 8 January 1980.

³³ For a detail quantitative analysis of the overmanning myth see Upham, *Retrospect and Prospects*, pp. 14-18.

However, BSC deliberately concealed this information, with Robert Scholey complaining labour costs were Grosvenor Place's greatest single deterrent to a prosperous future.³⁴ Nevertheless, Richard Pryke calculated that over the first decade of BSC's existence, UK steelworkers' relative earnings only rose by 10 per cent. Although the industry's white-collar staffing costs increased by a staggering 45 per cent, senior officials focused all of their energies on sacking production workers.³⁵ Indeed, from here on in, improving cashflow by way of de-manning would be the singular strategy adopted by management:

However, closures apart, relatively little was done to improve BSC's performance. Those in charge were well aware that action would have to be taken, but thought that there was still time in which to persuade the unions and effect the changes that were necessary. Hence although it would be unfair to say that the Corporation's leaders were doing nothing – they were busily closing works – they are open to the criticism of having done too little.³⁶

Having conducted their cynical smear campaign, BSC looked to place pressure on the unions. In November 1975, Congress House was informed further labour savings of £170m would be required to breakeven. This objective, management argued, could only be achieved by:

- terminating the GWW agreement;

³⁴ *The Times*, 22 August 1975.

³⁵ Pryke, *Public Enterprise*, p. 204.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.

- ending all unnecessary overtime;
- diverting further orders away from older works to new facilities;
- and significant compulsory redundancies.³⁷

Presenting the proposals, Scholey, who was by now revelling in his moniker of 'Black Bob', revealed that, if no consensus could be achieved by the New Year, he would take unilateral action. In rejecting the proposals, a resolute Sirs launched a boisterous counterattack:

They are taking us back to the harsh employer attitudes of the 1930s where people could be hired and fired at will. You can rest assured that we will garner all the forces of the trade union movement and political forces – which are very considerable – to ensure that this proposition does not succeed.³⁸

With BSC refusing to backdown, the head of the TUCSICC called for the assistance of new Industry Minister, Eric Varley:

The Government must act in this matter or else no union in the public sector will have confidence in negotiated agreements or procedure. It is no use any Minister hiding behind the statement that he 'is not in a position to give the Corporation instructions'. The issues raised by employers in a nationalised

³⁷ Sir Monty was looking to shed a further 44,000 jobs.

³⁸ *The Times*, 12 December 1975.

industry repudiating a collective agreement are too important to be ignored: their repercussions are too far reaching.³⁹

Following Downing Street talks with Varley and Harold Wilson, the pro-establishment Sirs softened his stance.⁴⁰ Another compromise deal was thrashed out. With the Corporation promising to uphold the hallowed GWW agreement, the steel unions consented to the implementation of an eight-point plan designed to reduce short-term 'recessionary overmanning' by voluntary means.⁴¹

Although the right-wing press lauded the deal as a victory for Sirs and the unions, it would eventually open the door to long-term mass redundancies.⁴² Attached to the original document was a joint statement specifically referring to the need to end "in-built overmanning".⁴³ The agreement, signed by each TUCSICC official, included the same apocryphal labour productivity statistics that Grosvenor Place had previously disseminated to perpetuate the myth of the overpaid, inefficient public steelworker. By signing the deal, Sirs and his colleagues simply helped reinforce the notion that their members were at fault for the crisis. The union leader later complained that the January 1976 agreement was, preceded by "years of continual pressure on myself and on the unions as BSC sought to reduce capacity by closing the older, less efficient

³⁹ *Man and Metal*, January 1976.

⁴⁰ The conservative General Secretary warned members against participating in unofficial strike action, having become concerned at reports suggesting hard-left political groups were recruiting his disgruntled members.

⁴¹ The bulk of these redundancies would initially fall on the sixteen Beswick plants.

⁴² *The Times*, 24 January 1976.

⁴³ BSC and TUCSICC, *Reductions in Employment Costs and Improvement in Labour Productivity*, 23 January 1976, ITSOE, BCA1/6.

plants”, yet this was achieved with the assistance of a compliant Congress House.⁴⁴ One TUCSICC official, for example, adopted a pro-management position by publicly supporting claims of poor productivity:

Britain is now an extremely inefficient industrial country. Successive reports on steel and other industries suggest we achieve lower levels of productivity than our principal competitors ... If certain Labour Party members are not prepared to accept the cuts, what is their alternative? Unpleasant though the cuts are, there is little else that can be done, except a siege economy and further unemployment.⁴⁵

Reflecting on the January 1976 agreement, Martin Upham bemoaned his former trade union colleagues’ readiness to take sole responsibility for improving performance:

Generally, unions have not understood the significance of productivity drives. They have shared the management assumption that employees hold the key to improved performance, that co-operation leads at once to a rise in competitiveness ... The unions seemed to accept that they bore a prime responsibility for restoring Corporation fortunes. They allowed the attachment of a highly tendentious tonnes per man year table to the agreement. Seemingly, it was the unions’ job to pull BSC up to ‘international manning levels’, and this was the path to success for the whole Corporation.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Sirs, *Hard Labour*, pp. 63-64.

⁴⁵ *Man and Metal*, November 1976.

⁴⁶ Upham, *Retrospect and Prospects*, pp. 14-16.

Fatefully, the agreement also permitted management to extend their policy of preferentially loading newer works at the expense of older ones. For Bilston this also meant that, as demand fell elsewhere, those new orders recently secured would also be re-routed to South Yorkshire.

The workforce, nevertheless, accepted the January 1976 agreement with a customary spirit of cooperation, with vast numbers of senior workers volunteering for early retirement. At the first of many ceremonies, a cohort of mill-men with almost eight centuries of loyal service received their cheques. By January 1978, a total of 302 workers voluntarily left the works, robbing it of vital expertise but saving management hundreds of thousands of pounds.⁴⁷ Elsewhere, following a year of continuous crisis, a relative calm beset the industry. With the new productivity agreement taking effect, even the customarily obdurate Scholey ventured to praise the attitude of the unions whilst visiting Llanwern works. The BSC Executive was in Wales to oversee a lighting ceremony for a new £27m blast furnace that had been delayed by a pay dispute. Standing beside him was NUB leader Hector Smith who, only weeks earlier, had responded to his counterpart's request for a 'copper-bottomed agreement' by dropping his trousers. In contrast, the union chief now adopted a much more sanguine stance, remarking that he hoped the new vessel would consume any "parochial views, misunderstandings and antagonisms" between management and the unions.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ JWP, *The Future of Bilston Works*, March 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/4, appendix 12.

⁴⁸ *The Times*, 17 February 1976.

A Temporary Respite

As a fragile peace returned to the industry, so too did a period of prosperity, with an upturn in the demand cycle coinciding with the signing of the January 1976 agreement. Two months later, BSC plants were operating at 90 per cent capacity. Recently appointed Prime Minister James Callaghan who, at this stage, was fully committed to state steel, permitted Eric Varley to introduce an array of supportive industrial policies. As a practical way of ensuring the Beswick plants remained in production until their official closure dates, Downing Street handed BSC £70m to manufacture counter-cyclical stockpiles of semi-finished goods. Other state-sponsored mechanisms included the sanctioning of four major price increases over twelve months and an extension to BSC's borrowing powers. In terms of development, Varley spoke publicly of expanding capacity to 37m t/p/a.

It was, nevertheless, the Government's decision to end Monty Finniston's reign of terror that brought most joy to the unions and their members. The Corporation's bogeyman was replaced by Sir Charles Villiers who, as an Eton educated true-blue Tory of royal descent, was a seemingly surprise choice. A closer look at his CV, nevertheless, reveals the Government's thinking. In a response to the failings of his predecessor, he was no technocrat, but a vastly experienced salesman. As an extremely affable character with great charm, Whitehall also hoped he would be less confrontational than his abrasive predecessor.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ As a former head of the Industrial Reorganisation Corporation, Villiers oversaw the restructuring of the UK electrical and ball bearing industries, which he achieved with the support of the workers and their trade unions.

For a short period at least, they were right in their assumption, with the new man successfully wooing union leaders. Upon appointment, he wrote to Congress House, outlining his plans for the industry. Unlike Finniston, Sir Charles made all the right noises, talking of winning back the domestic market, satisfying the customer, maximising output at existing sites, whilst improving job security for rank and file workers. Although Beswick closures would indeed still go ahead, he vowed to adhere to the original timetable. When rationalisation did occur, he would use his contacts in the City to attract new industry to affected communities. He also expressed a desire to usher in a period of closer industrial relations by improving existing consultative arrangements:

My friends ... We must get to the point where we can confidently say 'BSC cares and BSC delivers'. To do that we have to consult continuously between the men and management at all levels. We are partners, seeking to convince each other by practical arguments – not dogma – how to make our business better. Thereafter, Unions deliver and Managers manage ... Together get moving by pushing decision-making more and more down to the divisions and plants. Some responsibilities have to be kept at the centre, but we should get decisions made as near to the shop-floor as possible.⁵⁰

Villiers initially delivered on this promise, revealing proposals designed to expand industrial democracy whilst establishing new consultative apparatus at national and

⁵⁰ *Man and Metal*, September 1976. Won over by Villiers' charms, the ISTC published an editorial in *Man and Metal* congratulating him on his appointment whilst endorsing the policies outlined in his letter.

plant-levels. In a speech to the ISTC, he announced the expansion of the worker-director scheme as well as his intention to introduce a 'steel contract'. In a further effort to pacify Congress House, Sir Charles assumed the chairmanship of BSC Industry, a development agency established to attract private investment and new jobs to rationalised communities.⁵¹ This particular move impressed the ISTC, whose General Secretary had already committed himself to his predecessor's 'alternative employment' policy. When subsequently announcing his decision to extend the lifespan of Shotton, Villiers was dubbed 'Uncle Charles' by overjoyed steelmen. His appointment also coincided with a mini-boom.

The sense of optimism sweeping the industry made its way to the Black Country and, in January 1976, Bilston steelworks achieved its highest monthly output since October 1962. Management was once again quick to praise their men, "Everyone concerned in this performance deserves credit. It is good to be able to demonstrate success like this to those outside the industry who are always ready to knock it".⁵² At a June 1976 Works Council meeting, the Works Accountant confirmed recent financial results had by far exceeded those first predicted by planners. The men's response to the crisis helped post a profit of £3.1m for 1975/6. This contrasted with £16.5m and £246m losses at divisional and national level respectively.⁵³ As one worker put it, "The Staffordshire knot had propped up the Yorkshire rose".⁵⁴

⁵¹ With Villiers on board, BSC Industry sought to exploit his contacts within the world of high finance to attract new tenants to defunct sites in Lancashire, Scotland and South Wales. However, this proved a forlorn task once the crisis returned.

⁵² *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 30 January 1976.

⁵³ JURUE, *The Future of Bilston Steelworks: An Appraisal*, March 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/4, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Oral testimony from C. Simpkins, recorded 8 March 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

The recent sacking of the architect of their doom also brought a sense of relief to Bilston's shop-floor. Villiers' 'no customer, no business' philosophy, combined with the revival in trade, led to renewed hope for future investment. The new Chairman had publicly acknowledged the contribution of smaller facilities, whilst vowing to adopt a much more flexible approach to development. As part of his steel contract, 'Uncle Charles' announced a whistle-stop tour of the industry's older, less fashionable facilities, with Bilston scheduled for a November 1976 visit. This would be the first time a BSC Chairman had made his way to the Black Country and, in the eyes of local shop stewards, provided an opportunity for them to stake a claim for major investment.

Indeed, Villiers' appointment had coincided with a series of minor development schemes, as planners finally looked to inject some capital into the busy works. Approval was given for the installation of a £4m fume extraction unit, which would ensure Bilston's melting shop complied with environmental legislation coming into force at the end of the decade. Upon hearing the news, one employee adopted a remarkably optimistic tone:

This investment must do much to allay the fears of Bilston employees and their families regarding the immediate future of these Works. It is up to all of us now to see that the development provides a steppingstone into a future which not so long ago appeared to be non-existent. I am delighted that the Board has approved the expenditure, providing as it does, a substantial environmental improvement as well as a vehicle to carry Bilston into the 1980's.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 26 March 1976.

Villiers also sanctioned a £1m hydraulic press that would enable the plant to supply a wider variety of products to the lucrative export market. Then, in July 1976, Elisabeth's lifespan was extended by an additional five years. News of the reline project was enthusiastically welcomed by the BJUAC:

This takes us up to the 1980-82 period ... The men here want to be allowed to go on making steel to satisfy our tradition [*sic*] customers who come back again and again by saying they only want Bilston steel. We are proud of our record of loyalty and cooperation in good times and bad.⁵⁶

Villiers also agreed to trial double-ended firing, almost four years after it had first been proposed. Meanwhile, the new man, who secured an improved annual development budget from the Government, confirmed his conviction in the commercial viability of smaller works by backing Lord Beswick's electric arc furnace project at Shelton. Bilston had been provided a *tabula rasa*

When Sir Charles' Rolls-Royce pulled into A-Gate, spirits were at their highest since nationalisation. The BSC Chairman was immediately greeted by Works Council leaders who had been tasked with conducting a charm offensive. After being walked through the double-firing technique and given a tour of the iconic Big Lizzie, the dignitary was led to Alfred Hickman's oakwood boardroom and treated to a five-star luncheon featuring traditional Black Country fayre. The visit ended with a lively Q&A

⁵⁶ *The Express and Star*, 16 January 1976.

session in the training centre. In a well-received opening statement, Villiers enthusiastically praised Bilston's performance throughout the crisis:

I think that Bilston and Wolverhampton too are super, no doubt about it, the way you work and the way your work together and the speed at which you work are absolutely right and I would like to see this and feel that this is everywhere in the Corporation, perhaps this is sometimes easier in medium or smaller works than big works. There is a wonderful tradition at Bilston ... [you have] never made a loss, and those things are very important and certainly Bob Scholey, Dennis Murray and myself place a tremendous amount of importance upon the super quality of work done and the level of absenteeism and all the other factors that go to producing Bilston and Wolverhampton's performance.⁵⁷

Villiers then discussed the possibility of Bilston being absorbed into BSC's long-term operating plan:

I promise you that the BSC is at Bilston to stay, we are not going to abandon it. Firstly because of what I have said about the workforce, secondly, because you are in the right place and there is nowhere else in the Corporation, on the edge of the Black Country, where we are so close to the market – the whole sales business is geared to the market and thirdly, because you have some very good kit here – the mills and the finishing end. Looking back at history and all that has been said about Bilston – in another few years possible closure

⁵⁷ Statement by C. Villiers to Bilston Works Council, 26 November 1976, WCA, DW-173/1/1.

– since 1972 always stretching it out a little more and a little bit further away – I really feel and I am absolutely sure that you will be making iron and steel here until 1982 plus. How much the ‘plus’ will be I am unable to say – business is an incalculable thing and in 6 or 7 years all sorts of things might happen, new development might take place. I would like you to accept that you have a super business here, run it as hard as it will go and keep it going hard and as long as she will go, Open Hearths as well, and during this time I am sure that a natural solution to this problem will appear. I beg you do not get over excited, worried and miserable about what will happened.⁵⁸

Responding to a question on the long-term future of small integrated works, the BSC Chairman proclaimed:

Sir Charles felt that he thought we should look upon plants such as Bilston and Wolverhampton as being existing plants with a super workforce, which we will use so long as they are making a big contribution to BSC. The billet mill and finishing mill will continue to do so as far as can be seen. As far as the Melting Shop is concerned – as I have said you have 7 years, I cannot go any further than that but during 7 years a lot of things can happen.⁵⁹

These remarks would eventually come back to haunt Villiers but, for now at least, the men were overjoyed by his pledge that hot metal production would continue until 1982 at the very least. Receiving a rapturous round of applause, Sir Charles was presented

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

with a bespoke enamel box manufactured by a prestigious local enamelware company. The trinket's lid featured an etching of Elisabeth produced by Black Country native and official portrait artist to the Queen, Harry Ecclestone. Shop stewards looked to leave one final impression on Villiers by transporting him to Norton Villiers motorcycle works, established by his ancestor and namesake Sir Charles Pelham Villiers:

Charlie Villiers was coming down to Bilston and we'd got to try to impress him ... we wanted him to see the best of Bilston, and I had to present him with a Bilston Enamel. [He] wanted to see Villiers Street where they made Villiers Engines, and that was his uncle.⁶⁰

Having waved goodbye to Charlie, the workforce returned to their stations, assured that their plant's medium-term future had been secured. Moreover, they were excited by the very real prospect of securing substantial new investment.

This would all change, however, over the coming twelve months, as the crisis returned with a vengeance. Rather than representing a full recovery, the recent upturn had proven to be little more than a fleeting period of convalescence. As the industry entered the New Year, its commercial and financial prospects worsened. On one hand, the export market collapsed under the weight of tariff protection in the U.S., whilst on the other, the domestic motor vehicle and shipbuilding industries also retracted. Moreover, Villiers had failed to win back the Corporation's share of the

⁶⁰ Oral testimony from C. Simpkins, recorded 8 March 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

domestic market lost under his predecessor.⁶¹ For all his talk of cuddling the customer, service had deteriorated badly under his watch. A 1977 survey revealed only six per cent of British steel users thought that BSC's delivery performance was better than rival producers.⁶²

At a July 1977 press conference, an uncharacteristically sombre Sir Charles announced that, despite the mini-boom, his organisation had posted a disastrous £83m deficit, with further record-breaking losses expected the coming year.⁶³ Under the media spotlight, he cut an altogether different figure to the one praising Bilston's workforce only months prior. Speaking at the NUB's ADC that month, he shocked delegates by complaining that £65m per annum was being wasted needlessly maintaining older facilities.⁶⁴ Invoking the spirit of Monty Finniston, he began referring to the need to secure international manning levels and slash labour costs. With little sign of recovery, a decision was made to defer all non-essential investment schemes. This, however, did nothing to improve BSC's worsening cash-flow situation and, with weekly losses amounting to £3m, panic set in. Senior industry officials secretly began preparing proposals to expedite the closure dates of the Beswick plants. Moreover, under the auspices of the January 1976 agreement, they began re-routing more and more orders to newer facilities.

⁶¹ A half-year report published the following month revealed that, under Villiers, BSC had only increased its share of the UK market from 55.7 to 56.1 per cent. See *The Times*, 11 November 1976.

⁶² Pryke, *Public Enterprise*, p. 196.

⁶³ BSC, *Annual Report and Accounts 1976/7* (London, 1977), p. 26.

⁶⁴ *The Times*, 8 July 1977.

The spectre of the crisis haunted Bilston. In April 1977, local management were forced to quash shop-floor rumours that the works was “on the road to closure”; promising the men that Villiers’ November 1976 statement still rang true.⁶⁵ But these reassurances were undermined by Divisional Director Dennis Murray at the Works Council’s annual review meeting a month later. In a worrying move, he announced that the promised fume plant had been postponed permanently, arguing it was, “better to have full bellies than clean air”.⁶⁶ The decision was particularly galling in light of the Corporation pressing ahead with identical schemes in South Yorkshire. Likewise, the installation of the hotly anticipated gag press was also deferred, preventing the manufacture of lucrative new products.⁶⁷ The senior industry official ended his review by announcing that a recent Government decision to terminate their stockpiling strategy meant management would be seeking to reduce iron plate production by capping Elisabeth’s output. It was suddenly dawning on Bilston’s steelmen that, despite recently securing yet another annual profit of £4.8m, their efforts had been diluted by failings at the top.⁶⁸

A Fait Accompli

Responding to the announcement, David Hunter and union officials participated in a series of joint consultative meetings at The Mount. It was mutually agreed that, to help improve BSC’s worsening cashflow position, Bilston’s Blast Furnace Manager would

⁶⁵ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 1 April 1977.

⁶⁶ Minutes of Bilston Works Annual Progress Review meeting, 11 May 1977, ITSOE, BCA1/6.

⁶⁷ Murray then compounded matters by announcing that the installation of double-end firing had also been deferred, obstructing attempts to improve the efficiency of Bilston’s OH furnaces.

⁶⁸ JURUE, *The Future of Bilston Steelworks: An Appraisal*, March 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/4, p. 17.

restrict output to 0.26m t/p/a, the lowest at which Elisabeth could continue to operate. Management, nonetheless, provided assurances that the decision would be reviewed in three months' time.⁶⁹ Melting shop workers would meanwhile accommodate reduced iron output by temporarily operating a three-furnace steelmaking operation.

Recognising the seriousness of the overall situation, local steelmen and their middle-management team had approached discussions with an open mind. Yet only days later, The Mount ordered a shocked Hunter to temporarily switch the vessel off, before revealing that a unilateral decision had been taken to effectively close Bilston's entire Blast Furnace Department:

I should point out that, at the end of March – after Elisabeth has been mothballed for six months and in spite of extremely heavy usage of cold iron by the Division's arc furnaces – it looks as though there will be enough cold iron still in stock to supply Bilston's requirements for a further 18 months to 2 years. And this is without allowance for any of the mismatch tonnage arising, mentioned in your letter, which normally accounts for a substantial tonnage.⁷⁰

Responding to shop steward complaints over the deceitful manner in which they had forced through the move, Corporation officials claimed they had, "meticulously followed our high standards of consultation".⁷¹ The comments were rejected out of hand, with Dennis Turner accusing them of presenting a *fait accompli* to local

⁶⁹ Letter from S. Bull to Bilston works management committee, 5 July 1977, WCA, DW-173/1/1.

⁷⁰ Letter from J. Pennington to D. Turner, 31 October 1977, WCA, DW-173/1/1.

⁷¹ Letter from D. Murray to D. Turner, 29 September 1977, MRC, 755/4/4/5.

management.⁷² At a subsequent JCC meeting in Sheffield, a typically mild-mannered Hunter launched an unprecedented attack on The Mount:⁷³

The Middle Managers and Red Card Managers of Bilston Works feel the need to criticise higher management for the way in which the Mothballing of Blast Furnace Elisabeth was handled. It was deplorable! After all the words that have been uttered and written about consultation and devolution, it was disgraceful to present a 'FAIT ACCOMPLI' to the Bilston and Wolverhampton Works Council as was the case on 25th August 1977. It should have been obvious to whoever made the final decision to Mothball, that the effect would be traumatic, especially to the people directly affected. If we are expected to put any credence to the uttering of higher management it should be seen that they practice what they preach. Some people's lives and incomes have been, and others soon will be affected by this closure. Such a decision should not have been seen to have been made without consultation, and no matter how much senior managers protest, meaningful consultation did not take place during August. It was all the more apparent because meaningful consultation had taken place in May, June and July, at all levels, about, the short order book, the cash flow problem and the ever increasing Pig/Plate Iron stocks. This culminated in a proposal put to the Bilston and Wolverhampton Works Council by Management that was discussed and accepted by the Council.⁷⁴

⁷² Letter from D. Turner to D. Murray, undated, MRC, 755/5/4/5.

⁷³ As the last remaining Black Country Blast Furnace Manager, the Scotsman formed an intimate bond with a vessel his 8-year-old daughter had relit only fifteen months earlier. As part of the blowing-out ceremony, a concerned Hunter carried his bagpipes to the top of 'Big Lizzie' and played Scottish threnody hymn 'Flowers of the Forest'.

⁷⁴ SIMA statement to Sheffield Division, 1 December 1977, WCA, DW-173/1/3.

Decades later, Colin Simpkins is still incensed by the manner in which Elisabeth was taken offline:

... our steel was wanted, and somebody was stopping us from producing; whether it was Sheffield or whatever the case may be, our orders went down. Those sneaky lot! I think it was Bill Church at the time who said, "We are only mothballing you for a short period of time". Well you know if you mothball a bloody furnace you've got to have a reline after, and how much is that going to take? £2.5 million! Nobody is going to do that.⁷⁵

Elisabeth's mothballing was just the latest example of management exploiting established consultative arrangements to secure predetermined objectives. Since nationalisation, when the principles of partnership and industrial democracy were first established, local steelmen had eagerly embraced new consultative apparatus.⁷⁶ However, they were often left frustrated. At the aforementioned February 1975 Works Council meeting with Bob Scholey, shop stewards complained, "It was generally accepted that the consultative arrangements were sound for communications but not for pre-decision consultation and that more participation was required to use the experience of the workforce".⁷⁷ Reg Turley, a lifelong advocate of worker participation, argued consultative arrangements lacked teeth, "I have always felt that although we have this consultation machinery there has never been enough participation –

⁷⁵ Oral testimony from C. Simpkins, recorded 8 March 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

⁷⁶ Bilston was one of the first BSC works to establish departmental JCC's and six-monthly review meetings between the Works Council and management.

⁷⁷ Minutes of Bilston Works Council meeting, 13 February 1975, WCA, DW-173/1/1.

consultation, yes; information, yes, – but very little participation of workers”.⁷⁸ Two and a half years later, these complaints were substantiated by the manner in which Sheffield Division sabotaged ironmaking. Bemoaning the disingenuous nature of BSC’s approach to joint consultation and participation, former steelworker Charles Docherty concluded:

No attempt was made by managements jealous of their privilege and authority to create unity between themselves and their workers; instead, they supported and encouraged a costly and unwieldy system of so-called joint consultative committees where no real dialogue took place and whose only purpose seemed self-perpetuation ... The golden opportunity that nationalisation had given for managements to create a unity of purpose with those they managed was thrown away and the opportunity to jointly plan a mighty industry not taken up.⁷⁹

The impact of the Lizzie decision on overall performance, and the defence campaign, cannot be overestimated. It forced the works to process imported cold iron plate, thereby slowing tap-to-tap times by approximately four hours. Output per man decreased exponentially, with production costs moving in the opposite direction.⁸⁰ Moreover, once internal stocks had diminished, Bilston’s OH furnaces would be forced to rely on low quality iron manufactured elsewhere, leading to a higher customer rejection rate. The clandestine move represented a direct assault on profitability, the basis on which the men had consistently defended their livelihoods. Having previously

⁷⁸ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 4 April 1975.

⁷⁹ Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 230.

⁸⁰ Production costs rose by £20 per tonne as a result of the enforced decision. See JURUE, *The Future of Bilston Steelworks: An Appraisal*, March 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/4, p. 20.

overseen the managed decline of Bilston, management were now forcibly engineering a loss-making situation, thereby clearing the ground for a future assault.

The next phase would come almost immediately. In November 1977, six weeks after Hunter had been ordered to switch-off Elisabeth's fuel line, recently appointed Sheffield Division boss John Pennington travelled to the Black Country for an extraordinary Works Council meeting.⁸¹ Standing at the very same spot from which Sir Charles Villiers had made his pledge twelve months prior, he revealed:

The situation as I see it now is the same as was originally envisaged – that there is no likely requirement for steelmaking at Bilston in 1980, even though we may have hopefully started to climb out of the present recession by then 1980 will soon be only two years away anyway and we should have had to sit down and start discussions on the closure of iron and steel making at this time, and I see no obvious alternative to doing just this. You have rightly pointed out that the uncertainty surrounding the works cannot go on, and I am replying to you without equivocation to meet that point. Whether there is any longer-term role for the Bilston billet mill will have to be the subject of further discussion.⁸²

During a heated exchange, he confirmed that any future rundown notice would be discussed with the TUCSICC. In the meantime, the men would be afforded the

⁸¹ In April 1976 Special Steels was rebranded; the addition of 'Sheffield Division' to the plant's signage caused great deal of consternation on Bilston's shop-floor.

⁸² Statement made by Mr. J. Pennington, 8 November 1977, ITSOE, BCA1/2.

opportunity to produce their own counterproposals as per the Corporation's social policy. This, Pennington advised, should come in the form of a joint body. However, with very little faith in the industry's consultative procedures, shop stewards were initially reticent to support any such scheme, with one accusing The Mount of trying to lead the men up the "garden path".⁸³

The BJUAC Returns

Responding to the Dennis Murray announcement, the BJUAC abandoned their watching brief. Although the action committee had been dormant, its members, as senior shop stewards, had played a key role assisting in the implementation of the two national productivity agreements at plant-level. Interviewed in July 1975, one member outlined its current strategy, which was to help management maintain profitability, "We have to try to work with management, not against them – especially in these difficult times when there is a severe recession".⁸⁴

Meanwhile, since their last period of activity, Dennis Turner's political stock had risen considerably. Re-elected as a WMBC and WMCC Councillor, he was also selected to contest the Parliamentary constituency of Halesowen and Stourbridge. Although the Bilstonian twice lost the Tory safe seat by the finest of margins, his performance impressed both ISTC and Labour Party officials. Moreover, the activist had

⁸³ Minutes of Bilston Works Council meeting, 18 January 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/2.

⁸⁴ *The Steel News: Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley Edition*, 4 July 1975.

spearheaded anti-closure campaigns at local manufacturing firms.⁸⁵ Not only did this extend Turner's campaigning ability, but it also reinforced his authority in the eyes co-workers.

Whilst the BJUAC maintained a watching brief, a vanguard had emerged amongst its ranks. Joining Turley and Turner on the leadership team was the latter's older brother Bert, a charge-hand from the finishing end and Chair of ISTC No.6, representing 150 men. A man of deep loyalties, the future Mayor of Wolverhampton was extremely proud of his sibling's fledgling political career and had acted as his campaign manager during his most recent election bids. There was also Chairman of ISTC No.4, Graham Fazey, a no-nonsense 34-year-old who had recently been appointed Vice-Chair of the ISTC Joint Branches. Over the next eighteen months, he and Bert would become Dennis's *aides-de-camp*, acting as intermediaries between the BJUAC Chair, senior shop stewards, branch members and the wider workforce.

Joining Fazey was his branch Secretary Ted Wall who, as a former AEUW official, would later be called upon to garner the support of workers at local engineering firms. Another was Jack Jones, representing over 500 melting shop employees. The charge-driver had been an outspoken critic of senior management, responding to the May 1975 and January 1976 national productivity agreements with a scornful letter to union headquarters:

⁸⁵ After being informed by workers at Bilston Bath Company of their critical cash-flow situation, Turner persuaded fellow Councillors to purchase the firm's entire back stock. Meanwhile, he supported a failed workers' cooperative scheme at the troubled Norton Villiers' Wolverhampton plant.

May I make a few suggestions for *Man and Metal* which may help to put the poor old BSC on its feet. I am sure these suggestions would help to take them out of the red and save some of our jobs. First let's start at the top for a change and leave the poor low-paid worker alone and believe me there are still some in the BSC! Being aware that cuts have to be made my first proposal is that instead of the Chairman sacking 22,000 men, we suggest to him and all his puppets (down to and including General Managers) that they take a 20 per cent reduction in salary, and introduce a five per cent reduction for all staff earning £4,500 a year or more. I still think they could live comfortably, not like the poor old labourer whose time they keep cutting. I am sure fellow workers will agree that the people who keep crying out to cut costs start at the wrong end of the scale ...⁸⁶

Although Jones was known to be a somewhat cantankerous figure, as the leader of the plant's largest union branch his involvement was vital to the success of the campaign. Representing the 300-man TGWU branch were John Booth and Yorkshire-born Graham Howe, friends of the Turners.⁸⁷ As convenors in the rail traffic section of the Traffic Department, they represented a team of workers recognised for possessing a distinct occupational culture and identity:

Loco men have their own jargon. "Going up the Burma Road" means going along the stretch of straight track to the scrapyards; "The Tommy Woods" road

⁸⁶ *Man and Metal*, August 1975.

⁸⁷ Graham Howe was connected to the CLP, with the loco shunter driver's father-in-law serving as Secretary of Bilston Labour Club.

is the track leading out to what was Bilston Station, and named after a former wagon repairer who used to have a cabin at the end of the track.⁸⁸

There was Eli Ball, he was a character; “never trust human flesh whilst it’s warm”, he used to say [laughs].⁸⁹

Joining them was UCATT convenor Frank Robinson, a bricklayer whose charm and quick wit made him a popular figure around the works. Finally, there was NUB man Malkit Singh. Born in India, he entered the works as a general labourer before rising through the ranks to become a blast furnaceman.⁹⁰ Another popular figure, he was a familiar face in and around the plant’s busy Social Centre.

The BJUAC could also rely on a supporting cast of younger shop stewards who would mobilise branch members when required. Joining his fellow ISTC No.6 officials was Peter Winmill, whose grandmother was a much-loved employee in the works canteen. Then there was Scotsman Frank ‘Big Jock’ Farrell, a louder than life character around the finishing end. Parachuted into the Black Country in the early 1960s to build S&L’s rolling mills, he had developed a deep bond with the town’s inhabitants. Although, like many of Bilston’s convenors, he was actively involved in his CLP, trade union politics was where his true passion lay. From the NUB was Singh’s close friends Gurdeep Ram and Amaljit Toora, two furnace hands who assisted their Branch Secretary

⁸⁸ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 4 July 1975.

⁸⁹ Oral testimony from G. Howe recorded 25 January 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

⁹⁰ Turner had become aware of Singh whilst delivering Council-backed race relations schemes in the local community.

mobilise their many BAME colleagues.⁹¹ The campaign also benefitted from the support of a small group of female office workers. Dubbed the 'little birds', the likes of Doreen Whyman, Carol Crane and Geanette Man secured confidential information that was secretly communicated to the action committee.

The BJUAC re-emerged in August 1977, seeking clarification over management's true intentions *vis-à-vis* Elisabeth. Concerned by the ambiguity of Sheffield Division's initial *communiques*, they looked to block the 'temporary' order by arranging for all ISTC branches to pass a scripted resolution:

There shall be no co-operation from ISTC members employed at the works in finding alternative jobs or employment for displaced blast-furnace or other personnel. This situation will remain until such time guarantees can be given as to the future operation of the Blast Furnace within the structure of the Bilston Plant.⁹²

It was anticipated that, by preventing the approximately 150 men employed in the Blast Furnace Department from working elsewhere, the Corporation would be forced into withdrawing the order.⁹³ Unsurprisingly, the resolution was completely ignored by

⁹¹ A March 1978 report identified 438 foreign-born employees, representing a quarter of the entire workforce. Under the leadership of Ram, Toora and Singh, these men would play an active role in the campaign. TV footage of a subsequent public protest, for example, shows a significant contingent of BAME steelmen standing shoulder to shoulder with the BJUAC leadership.

⁹² Letter from R. Turley to S. Bull, 27 September 1977, WCA, DW-173/1/4.

⁹³ With the closure of the Blast Furnace Department affecting less than 1,000 workers, management was prohibited from making its employees redundant. By seeking to reassign these workers elsewhere onsite, BSC was hoping to force a large section of the workforce to accept reduced earnings under the GWW.

management. The BJUAC responded by organising a September 1977 mass meeting whereby, following a clarion call for unity, workers backed the launch of a top-level pressure campaign. Those in attendance also unanimously voted through a resolution permanently establishing the basis from which their leaders would conduct all future negotiations:

- to fight for the retention of iron and steelmaking;
- only if all alternatives to closure had been completely exhausted, to permit the TUCSICC to negotiate a redundancy package.⁹⁴

The order deliberately locked each of Bilston's union branches into the campaign by ensuring individual workers couldn't negotiate voluntary redundancy without the backing of their sectional colleagues.⁹⁵ Despite providing an extra-layer of armour, it would later prompt accusations of autocracy from some. Decades later, a candid Turner reflected on the reasoning behind the tactic:

Well, in order to get the best possible terms, they'd got to fight for their jobs. They'd got to fight for the plant, and they couldn't very easily ... separate the two parts. They had to accept the first part to get to the second part. And the question was ... you might say it was disingenuous, but I never regarded it as such ... they never knew when the first part was lost, and so they had to continue, and once every branch on the plant had carried that resolution, and

⁹⁴ Referencing Villiers' November 1976 pledge, the BJUAC announced that, in the event of full closure, they expected to be paid until November 1982.

⁹⁵ The resolution proved prophetic, with Grosvenor Place later targeting vulnerable workers at doomed plants with mouth-watering redundancy packages.

once they'd carried that resolution they were committed to the very end. And of course that [later] caused a [great deal] of schisms on the plant, because of you went around the plant you'd see either "Turner for Pope" or "Turner is a bastard", and it was written on white paint ...⁹⁶

Nevertheless, at this early stage, the BJUAC could rely on the full cooperation of the shop-floor. One campaign supporter remembers the atmosphere at the mass meeting:

We were packed in like sardines. When Dennis approached the stage, a deadly silence descended on the social centre. Many of the older shop stewards could send you to sleep, but Dennis, we hung on every word ... The way they stole 'Lizzie' from us was a knife in the back. Although a few of the blast furnace workers were despondent, the vast majority of us were angry.⁹⁷

Surveying the mindset of rank and file workers at this stage, it is evident that the manner in which management unilaterally mothballed Elisabeth had engendered a wider feeling of righteous indignation. A clear sense of injustice spurred even the most insentient of workers into answering local shop stewards' call to arms. Moreover, it induced a new form of camaraderie, as identified by shop steward Pete Winmill:

The place was always good any way, for spirit and camaraderie, that's what I loved about the place. You had the *cracke*, there was some great people there

⁹⁶ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, pp. 10-11.

⁹⁷ Oral testimony from anonymous, recorded 18 February 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

mate ... But when it got to the point where we all knew we were going down the slippery slope, I think it brought people closer together. I've got a particular friend called Mike Worrall and I only really knew him from 1977 onwards and that was because we were starting to close. We got to meet each other at one of the [mass] meetings in the Social Club where the convenors were talking to us about what was going on ... and I still go out with this guy to this day and we still talk about the steelworks.⁹⁸

Having secured a fully binding mandate, the BJUAC resolved to once again seek political intervention, with Turner penning a letter to Downing Street demanding management be exposed to a greater degree of accountability.⁹⁹ By November 1977, with 'Big Lizzie' now lying dormant, the men still hadn't received a response from James Callaghan's office. Edwards once again agreed to coordinate a letter-writing campaign targeting sympathetic Labour Party officials. They subsequently organised an intensive process of stakeholder engagement, establishing a new network of influential regional and national political supporters. Unsurprisingly, the first to respond were Turner's colleagues at WMBC. The May 1976 local elections had ushered in a much friendlier political climate locally, with the Labour Group taking full control of the Council. Under the leadership of Ken Purchase, a close friend of Turner, the local authority formed a task force investigating the potential impact closure might have on the wider community. Civic leaders were principally concerned by local male unemployment rates, which between 1960 and 1976 had risen from 0.7 to 6.6 per

⁹⁸ Oral testimony from P. Winmill recorded 16 March 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

⁹⁹ Letter from D. Turner to J. Callaghan, 21 September 1977, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

cent.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, in the face of widespread industrial decline, they had become alarmed at how central Government policy had undermined Wolverhampton's traditional manufacturing base.¹⁰¹ The task force's findings were startling. Employing approximately one tenth of Bilston's population, closure would raise overall unemployment figures to approximately 9 per cent, whilst the loss of business rates would leave a considerable hole in WMBC's annual budget.¹⁰² Disturbed by the study, a delegation of cross-party Councillors travelled to Westminster to petition Ministers.

With their external support base widening, the Bilston men garnered the official backing of their constituency political parties. Wolverhampton South East Conservative Association demanded a public inquiry into Elisabeth's mothballing. They were joined by the Wolverhampton CLP who, in a sharply worded letter to Callaghan, criticised their Government's industrial strategy:

... we feel that it is very short-sighted, and contrary to the idea of industrial planning, to run down capacity simply because we happen to be in a recession. Recovery in the next few years must be a certainty, and so it is important to sustain productive potential, especially in the basic industries such as steel, so as to be well-prepared.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ *The Express and Star*, 17 July 1979.

¹⁰¹ Harold Wilson's New Town Acts (1965 and 1968) had had the effect of pushing traditional manufacturing industries out of Wolverhampton and towards neighbouring counties.

¹⁰² WMBC, *The Social and Economic Impact of the Closure of British Steel – Bilston*, February 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/4.

¹⁰³ Letter from R. Boffy to J. Callaghan, 14 November 1977, WCA, DW-173/1/6.

The men also received the backing of the West Midlands Labour Party, who passed the following resolution:

The West Midlands County Labour Party view with concern the proposed closure of the British Steel Corporation Iron and Steel Works located at Bilston in the West Midlands. This proposal was disclosed by Mr. J.S. Pennington, Managing Director of the Sheffield Division, of which Bilston is a part, to a Works Council meeting on Tuesday, 8th November, 1977. There are no plans for Iron and Steel making at the Works after 1980, and the resultant loss of 2,300 jobs, combined with the loss of rates to the Corporation with all suppliers, shops and services affected, would pose a serious threat to an already impoverished area". We trust you will take serious note of our concern bearing in mind, that the West Midlands used to be the prosperous, industrial heart of the country, but over the last ten to fifteen years it has been run down by successive Governments, that industrially it is becoming a depressed area.¹⁰⁴

In December 1977, the BJUAC leadership met Midland Labour MPs in the Commons. Never ones to miss an opportunity to publicise their crusade, they arranged for a press photographer to capture a group of placard waving workers standing alongside the likes of George Park and Bruce Grocott in Parliament Square.¹⁰⁵ Inside the House, Turner made an impassioned speech revealing his fears for the future of the regional economy. Impressed by the presentation, they agreed to lobby Eric Varley:

¹⁰⁴ Letter from G. Andrews to E. Varley, undated, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

¹⁰⁵ *The Express and Star*, 9 December 1977.

As you are aware, these [Bilston] steelworks employ approximately 3,000 people; they supply specialised steel, and in some cases hot ingots, to local metal manufacturers. It is a viable plant, makes a surplus every year and any suggestion if its closure would be a very serious blow to the local community. It was my clear understanding, following talks with the Chairman of the BSC, Sir Charles Villiers, that they were putting more money into the steelworks and expanding its production, rather than closing it. In light of these circumstances, I wonder if you have any observations to make and whether you would agree to meet representatives of the Trade Union Action Committee that has been established because of these rumoured new developments.¹⁰⁶

By once again mobilising a powerful provincial lobby to do their bidding, the BJUAC placed great pressure on Varley to act. The Minister arranged for his Undersecretaries, Les Huckfield and Gerard Kaufman, to meet a delegation of workers. The talks would have a considerable impact on the future direction of the campaign. Huckfield, himself a Birmingham native, sympathised with the men's plight and provided reassurances that no firm decision had been made regarding Bilston's long-term future. When giving personal guarantees that any counterproposal would be scrutinised by civil servants as well as management, the junior ministers revealed all future investment decisions would be made on strictly commercial – and not social – lines.¹⁰⁷ A somewhat relieved BJUAC returned to the Black Country and, acting on the advice, committed to Pennington's JWP exercise:

¹⁰⁶ Letter from R. Edwards to E. Varley, 11 November 1977, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from L. Huckfield to C. Phipps, 15 February 1978, WCA, DW.173/1/5.

Remit as agreed by vote on 6th January 1978:- To retain maximum possible employment at Bilston Works. By backing the Working Party on the future of the Works to produce the most feasible report with regard to: 1) existing process at the works; 2) additional prospects identified to enhance or extend the existing product range; and 3) additional prospects identified through involvement of British Steel Industries or otherwise.¹⁰⁸

Turner immediately outlined the new strategy to fellow workers:

The committee were concerned about the future of Bilston Works. We put the view that there is a future for Bilston within the BSC strategy. Bilston has potential, supplies the kind of steel customers want, and we believe has a viable future.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

After the turmoil of the Edward Heath ministry, the return of Harold Wilson's Labour Government initially brought new hope to public sector steelmen, particularly those employed at traditional production units overlooked by the Ten Year Strategy. However, the Beswick Review proved to be a false dawn. The Government's decision to focus on the social implications of the previous regime's development model meant its many technical and commercial flaws were overlooked.

¹⁰⁸ BJUAC Remit, 6 January 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/3.

¹⁰⁹ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 18 November 1977.

The provisions of the review were immediately rendered meaningless by the arrival of the steel crisis, with BSC's overall performance deteriorating even further under its hapless new Chairman Sir Monty Finniston. The confrontational industry chief was determined to improve his organisation's worsening cash flow situation by way of compulsory mass redundancies and expedited plant closures. Blaming production workers for their own many failings, management used apocryphal labour productivity statistics to persuade the steel unions to sacrifice members at older plants. The appointment of Bill Sirs had meant to foreshadow a more resilient phase in the anti-closure movement. Yet the General Secretary merely persisted with those defective deferment policies implemented by his much-maligned predecessor. Bereft of ideas, he and his fellow General Secretaries accepted management prerogative by signing two national productivity deals that legitimised Finniston's false narrative.

Responding to this new era of austerity, Bilston's diligent and highly skilled steelworkers adapted workplace practices, coordinating a sweeping cost reduction programme and marketing campaign that ensured their facility remained one of the few profitable concerns in the entire industry. For a brief period, a feel-good factor returned to the shop-floor, with the recruitment of a seemingly more progressive BSC Chairman commissioning new machinery and absorbing their works into his updated medium-term operating plan. However, without significant investment, Bilston remained vulnerable. When the crisis returned, Sir Charles Villiers sought to rundown older plants. Exploiting established consultative arrangements – and the goodwill of Bilston's moderate shop stewards – management unilaterally mothballed the plant's blast furnace. The forced cessation of hot metal practice constituted industrial

sabotage and heralded a more formal phase in the rundown process. By deliberately engineering a lossmaking situation, BSC had not only cleared the ground for a future assault but also undermined the very basis of the men's erstwhile defence campaign.

Spurred on by a clear sense of injustice, a revamped BJUAC scrambled into action. After seeking the advice of Whitehall allies, they decided to retain a low public profile whilst participating in a joint management exercise that called for the retention of their plant on commercial lines. This, the next chapter will demonstrate, was a fool's errand. With a much-changed political landscape, the Corporation would seek to forcibly rundown steelmaking operations once and for all, prompting the Bilston men to make a tactical transition – tying their fates with trade union leaders in London.

Chapter 5: The Road to Scarborough

This chapter is principally concerned with responses to a Labour Government decision to concede to management prerogative and disengage from state steel. It begins with a review of the JWP exercise, demonstrating how Bilston's steelmen produced a detailed and sophisticated counterproposal convincingly advocating the retention and development of their facility on commercial grounds. However, as they busily prepared their survival blueprint, wider economic and political events would overtake local actions. Swayed by Grosvenor Place's claims of overmanning and overcapacity, the Government sanctioned a closure stampede. Left to their own devices, planners snubbed calls for investment and sought to negotiate the closure of the Bilston plant at national level.

The chapter sheds light on the action committee's tactical response to these events, which saw them enter a new strategic phase in their anti-closure campaign. It is determined how a streamlined leadership team widened its support base by mobilising the Black Country labour movement and cultivating closer ties with their union leaders in London. Of particular interest is their relationship with Bill Sirs who, following an intensive round of lobbying, finally agreed to back their most recent survival plan. The chapter subsequently examines the impact this had on the mindset of workers who were displaying early signs of battle weariness. It ends by providing a detailed account of how anxious shop stewards, concerned by the conduct of union officials, sought to drive national defence strategy from within.

Electric Dreams

Spearheading the JWP was a group of shop stewards tied to the BJUAC. Four open access sub-committees were established for interested parties to voluntarily contribute, drawing on the support of dozens of enthusiastic steelmen.¹ In a further display of solidarity, some of Bilston's most influential middle-managers promised to "sink or swim" with their men.² As experienced researchers and report writers, they played a key role in delivering the final document. In another expression of shop-floor harmony, Red Card managers agreed to transfer each JWP member onto daytime shifts, meaning they could devote their entire energies to producing the report. At this stage, workers continued to enjoy close relations with local senior management, refusing to blame them for the actions of industry officials:

We went to a meeting and the acting manager of the works then, was a chap called Stan Bull, who I knew quite well, only because he didn't live that far from where I used to live – this was before I'd got my own house – so I knew Stan Bull quite well, and a nicer bloke you couldn't wish to meet. And he had to stand in front of a pretty hostile workforce and tell them that the blast furnace was only being mothballed and when times got better it would be started up again. He was telling men that knew it could never happen. And I felt sorry for him, because all he was, was a mouthpiece, without a doubt.³

¹ The sub-committees were established to deal with any technical, commercial, personnel and financial issues not covered by the main body.

² Preliminary JWP meeting, 24 November 1977, ITSOE, BCA1/2.

³ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, p. 36.

The JWP immediately looked to determine their overall objectives and terms of reference. John Pennington had provided a completely open brief – with options ranging from large-scale investment to partial or complete closure. After receiving a mandate to retain the maximum number of jobs at the September 1977 mass meeting, the action committee refused to discuss a mills-only scheme. They were specifically concerned that the Corporation had previously convinced colleagues at threatened works to accept the closure of their heavy-end in exchange for the continuation of re-rolling, only to later renege on their promise. A local management team, led by Stan Bull, would be forced to study this option by themselves. The trade union side of the JWP, therefore, explored three alternatives:

- the redevelopment of production and finishing facilities;
- the continuation of operations using current plant and equipment;
- or permanent closure.

Acting on the guidance of Les Huckfield, they absorbed the Council study on socio-economic implications of closure into the appendices of the final report, meaning the main body focused exclusively on the commercial case for investment. A key JWP argument was that, by discarding Bilston, the Corporation would considerably weaken its voice in the West Midlands. Cognizant of Charles Villiers' pledge to win back BSC's home market share, the authors highlighted the unavoidable risk of transferring Bilston's current orderbook to alternative sites, "Without Bilston the Corporation would considerably weaken its voice in the local market place and could well reduce its whole market credibility in the Midlands".⁴ Substantiating this, the report cited previous cases

⁴ JWP, *The Future of Bilston Works*, March 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/4, p. 4.

whereby the transfer of orders away from Bilston had led to Black Country clients taking their business elsewhere. To verify their claim, the JWP surveyed the plant's customer base, determining 46,700 t/p/a would be lost if management had their way.⁵

With the document establishing the benefits of maintaining a public sector presence at Bilston, it proceeded to outline the case for industrial renewal. In line with Bob Scholey's February 1975 statement to the Works Council, it was argued that, by re-establishing the plant as a flexible support unit, BSC could fulfil small tonnage orders overlooked by the Big Five and South Yorkshire. The report then produced an exhaustive review of potential investment schemes. It was resolved that the most viable option was to install an electric arc furnace capable of producing 0.44m t/p/a. For a relatively insignificant outlay of £13.84m, a cumulative profit of £23m could be realised by March 1982. Looking to address the need to cut labour costs, the report proposed the shedding of 1,154 men and £5.8m per annum in wages.

The last, capitalised sentence reminded management of the contribution Bilston had made to the Corporation since nationalisation:

WHILST IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO EVALUATE THE EFFECT OF ALL THESE FACTORS IN STRICTLY FINANCIAL TERMS, IT CANNOT BE DISPUTED THAT THE CORPORATION HAS DERIVED CONSIDERABLE BENEFIT FROM THIS SITUATION IN THE PAST, AND COULD CONTINUE TO DO SO IN THE FUTURE.⁶

⁵ *Ibid.*, appendix 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

The industrious JWP team had finished the detailed 29-page report a month ahead of schedule. In the meantime, shop stewards looked to further advance the commercial viability of their facility. Working with middle-management, they delivered a 'Think Customer' campaign reassuring steel users that Bilston was open for business:

We have really got to go out and sell Bilston steel as Scarborough sells its tourism. Despite the present uncertainty it is no time for a negative attitude among the people who work at Bilston. What we want is a positive contribution from everyone, and a determination that the customer comes first in our approach to the future ... Our slogan is that Bilston steel is best. Our customers wants [sic] it to stay that way, and we are determined that it will.⁷

In a wider effort to secure additional sales, Dennis Turner wrote an impassioned letter to private metal bashers:

On behalf of the Bilston Joint Union Liaison Committee, who, together with many other Agencies and Establishments, profoundly believe in Bilston's ability to make steel, coupled with our desire to give service, quality and satisfaction to our customers, whom we know in return have responded to Bilston by indicating their choice and preference for Bilston steel! We would wish to place on record our sincere and humble thanks to all those customers who in these past difficult months for Bilston, have continued to show the workforce at Bilston, and the plant of which we are duly proud, their support

⁷ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 2 December 1977.

for Bilston in the best way possible: identifying Bilston as their source of steelmaking requirements! To those who do not indicate a preference for Bilston steel for whatever reasons, a right and privilege incidentally, which we both uphold and sustain, we would urge you to consider what practical help and support might be afforded the Bilston Steel works, not only thereby contributing to the sustenance of a long term future for Bilston, but also and probably of more significance in retaining the flexibility of your future steel requirements, which must be from a business point of view worthwhile preserving for the future.⁸

Decades later, Turner outlined the BJUAC's new customer-focused strategy:

We felt that it was important to produce the arguments that British Steel had not taken any time to produce, and particularly that of the customers – their customers – that were using Bilston steel and felt strongly about the quality of Bilston steel, that it was the right quality and the service that they got from Bilston was very, very satisfactory to their needs ... there was a very, very powerful case for its retention from the customers. And I used to be at the sharp end of that because ... I was sending the steel to the customers, so I was getting the vibes from the lorry drivers and people who were bringing back messages from the steelworks that we were supplying to.⁹

⁸ Letter from D. Turner to miscellaneous, 4 July 1978, MRC, 755/4/4/5.

⁹ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, pp. 9-10.

The Road to Viability

By focusing their survival blueprint on commercial considerations – and not social ones – Bilston's steelworkers had given themselves the best possible chance of convincing planners to invest. The efforts of the JWP were, however, soon overtaken by wider political events. In December 1977, days after the Working Party was established, a SCNI published a damning study into the future of BSC. Led by a coalition of cross-party MPs, the committee endorsed management's claims of overcapacity and overmanning:

The Corporation, in its present difficulties, should place the greater part of its efforts on raising the productivity of existing works through the achievement of rational manning levels rather than incurring higher overall costs through the introduction of new facilities, the provision of which may contribute further to the chronic excess of capacity over demand.¹⁰

Recent crisis meetings between BSC and the unions had ended in stalemate, with the latter unwilling to consent to calls to expedite the closure of the Beswick works. Public, media and Parliamentary scrutiny regarding the Corporation's finances eventually forced an increasingly vulnerable Eric Varley to intervene. Although the Minister revealed his Government was still willing to lend its support to the industry, he informed Congress House that BSC and the TUCSICC had to be seen taking joint action. In February 1978, the unions softened their stance, agreeing to negotiate the closure of the Beswick plants on the following basis:

¹⁰ SCNI, *Report of the Committee*, December 1977, pp. 18-22.

- no compulsory redundancies;
- closure only with the consent of the workforce;
- and a new Severance Agreement.¹¹

The final stipulation was an indication of how official trade union policy had shifted since the return of the crisis. In August 1977, when responding to members' complaints regarding their failure to act on the April 1973 national resolution, the ISTC Executive admitted:

The General Secretary read correspondence received from this branch expressing concern about the possibility of early closure of certain departments within the Works prior to the Beswick date. They also protested at the fact that the resolution carried at the 1973 Special Delegate Conference was not being adhered to by the Executive Council. A discussion ensued when the Executive policy was reiterated, namely that they would oppose any attempts to close plants prior to the Beswick dates, but that a different situation existed at the present time than which existed during the period when the resolution was passed in 1973 and this organisation would have extreme difficulty in implementing the terms of the resolution.¹²

¹¹ TUCSICC discussion document: Future BSC Investment Strategy and Works Closures, 7 March 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

¹² Minutes of ISTC EC meeting, 17-19 August 1977, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

Three months later they came up with a new five-point plan, described by Upham as something of “a retreat”.¹³ At its core was a decision to abandon the alternative employment strategy in exchange for a new national redundancy scheme or a golden handshake.¹⁴ The plan merely prompted management to use lucrative compensation packages to secure their ultimate goal: the negotiated closure of all older plants outside the Big Five and South Yorkshire.

Sirs would later sum up the impact this ploy had on persuading vulnerable sections of workers to relinquish their livelihoods:

How can you get workers, many of them in their fifties, some of them in debt, others needing a new car or new furniture or a holiday, to turn down huge sums of money and instead fight the employers with tough, sustained industrial and political action? The fact is, you cannot.¹⁵

This perspective, however, conveniently ignores the role his EC played in encouraging the cynical management tactic:

I again appealed to the Minister, and the government did do something they thought would help us. They allowed the British Steel Corporation to make much bigger redundancy payments to those workers who accepted early works closure and early redundancy. But the offer of greater golden handshakes was

¹³ Upham, *Tempered*, p. 125.

¹⁴ Minutes of ISTC EC meeting, 16-18 November 1977, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

¹⁵ Sirs, *Hard Labour*, p. 67.

the last thing we needed. I knew in my heart that now we would never successfully fight a closure, even if the workers agreed to give it a go. BSC of course, was delighted ... they went over our heads direct to the workforce and the lure of a few thousand pounds severance pay was enough to make the majority of workers vote for acceptance of BSC's offer.¹⁶

Until now, WAC leaders had been able to appeal for the support of colleagues by focusing on the values of shop-floor solidarity, fraternal brotherhood and the 'right to work', but BSC's new policy meant the future of an entire plant could be decided by financial self-interest. Eventually, a common pattern would emerge, which Anthony Tudor, a Wolverhampton-based TGWU official, disclosed in a letter to Transport House:

Their [BSC] policy seems to be one of closure of Furnaces one by one in certain plants, placing the personnel who have been displaced on the guaranteed week and making the personnel concerned so disenchanted by the severe loss of earnings incurred that they then begin to queue up for severance payments being offered, thereby bringing about the closures the Corporation evidently desire.¹⁷

Tudor's assertion would prove prophetic, with the Government acquiescing to management prerogative by officially sanctioning the buying-off of workers in a March 1978 White Paper. At only 11-pages, the optimistically titled 'Road to Viability' sought

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁷ Letter from A. Tudor to R. Harrison, 1 February 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

to outline how management, with Whitehall's blessing, would save the industry. The new strategy represented a paradigm shift. In the face of a new economic and political reality, the Government was now willing to abandon the commitment made in Labour's Programme.

With the consent of Whitehall and the unions, BSC returned to the Beswick sites, securing expedited closure agreements at Clyde Iron, East Moors, Hartlepool and Ebbw Vale. Although the Road to Viability provided few details on the futures of remaining sites outside the Big Five and South Yorkshire, it repeatedly referred to "high-cost" facilities. Crucially, there was now nothing to prevent Grosvenor Place from extending their rationalisation programme beyond the confines of Beswick. Aware of this, a concerned Bob Edwards confronted Varley in the Commons:

Is my right hon. Friend in a position to say whether the Bilston steelworks comes within the category that he described as a high-cost plant? If so, I suggest that that is very debateable because it has never made a loss since nationalisation. Is he aware that if the Bilston plant is closed that will double unemployment in my constituency and create serious problems for the whole of the metal industry in the West Midlands?¹⁸

With the Government on board, a determined Sir Charles Villiers outlined his ambitious rationalisation plans:

¹⁸ 946 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1978) cols. 1526-27.

It cannot be said that conditions are favourable to our industry, nor to our Corporation, nor to joint consultation. We have too much capacity – in Europe as a whole there is 30 per cent too much ... when we identify plants which, if closed, would enable steel and steel products to be made cheaper elsewhere within the Corporation, we shall have to get into closure procedure. Everybody loathes this situation. I cannot bear to recount the cases. And the arguments on both sides are totally familiar with me. For as long as possible my colleagues and I have held back to give every chance for the market to improve; to see if new arguments would come forward and for alternative ideas to be developed. But there are cases where the arguments for closure are inescapable, where avoidable losses could be eliminated, where lower cost plants could deliver substantially better and cheaper steel and where the road to viability inexorably leads. In those cases we dare not flinch or we shall betray the interests of the majority who work in BSC.¹⁹

The Corporation was now talking openly of matching future capacity with expected demand. In advance of the White Paper, Grosvenor Place had provided civil servants with data capping forecasted output at 16m-22m t/p/a over the next five years.²⁰ With capacity already standing at 25m t/p/a and, with an additional 5m tonnes set to come online at the Big Five, there was no room for additional schemes. Varley assented to both projected sales figures and management's discriminatory preferential loading policy, as revealed in his response to Edwards' question in the House:

¹⁹ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 22 June 1978.

²⁰ BSC, *Prospects for Steel*, April 1978.

I have no precise financial figures for particular plants. One difficulty is that, given a demand for only 17 million tonnes of British Steel Corporation production this year against a theoretical capacity of 25 million to 26 million tonnes, loading the plants does not have a great effect. It means that some plants can be loaded to produce a profit, while others, which are generally described as low-cost plants, are loaded inefficiently. That is a difficult management problem for the Corporation.²¹

The Road to Viability thereby halved planned capital expenditure, permanently shelving the Shelton and Glengarnock projects in the process.²²

The change in Whitehall's steel strategy could not have come at a worse possible time for Bilston. Arriving days before the JWP report had been submitted, it ended any prospect of planners approving the electric arc scheme. The next month the men presented their findings to divisional management in Sheffield. Chairing proceedings, a self-assured John Pennington cast doubt over the legitimacy of the report's customer survey, audaciously accusing its authors of adopting a parochial view of Sheffield Division's ability to produce quality steel.²³ He revealed that, after purportedly consulting Bilston's customer base, The Mount had received cast-iron assurances that Black Country steel users would continue to order from BSC if the plant was to indeed shut. Turner refuted this submission, implying the result of the JWP exercise was preordained:

²¹ 946 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1978) col. 1527.

²² BSC, *The Road to Viability*. HMSO Cmd. 7149, March 1978.

²³ Minutes of meeting between the Bilston JWP and Sheffield Division Steelworks Group Planning Committee, 14 April 1978, MRC, 755/4/4/5.

Mr. Turner indicated that in his view the strategic approach in Sheffield Division had failed to take proper account of Bilston as part of the Division. Within planning exercises, little consideration had been given to the possible transfer of work to Bilston and that had led to the situation where the Division could say that Bilston was not required. The whole basis of planning had been what could be done in Sheffield, which was a negative approach to the strategy; there was little need to carry out the exercise through the Working Party if discussion related only to present capacity and facilities.²⁴

Dennis Murray inflamed an already tense situation by highlighting that, with Bilston losing money, permanent closure would secure immediate cash-flow savings for BSC. An unconventionally animated Reg Turley reminded his Group Director of the very reasons the Black Country facility had become economically unviable:

Mr. Turley commented that the closure option would, on the face of it, bring financial benefits quicker than the development option. However, closures in other parts of the Corporation had been of loss-making works and Bilston, until the mothballing of the blast furnace, been profitable. Although the advantage of loading lower cost route was accepted, the cost savings already made by actions affecting Bilston, even if at other works, should be taken into account.²⁵

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Sheffield Division officials, nonetheless, refused to be drawn into a debate on the impact of the Big Lizzie decision, with Pennington avoiding scrutiny by bringing proceedings to a premature end.

The BJUAC leadership held very little hope management had been persuaded to invest. Their fears were soon realised. Deliberating for just fourteen days, and not two months as originally planned before the release of the White Paper, Pennington delivered his verdict to the Works Council in April 1978. Taking his seat in the training centre, he categorically rejected the JWP recommendations. Justifying his decision, the Sheffield Division boss advanced the same overcapacity/overmanning argument peddled by Grosvenor Place and recently endorsed by the Government:

In line with the overall excess of steelmaking capacity in the Corporation, we have in the special billet and bar area a substantial surplus of liquid steel capacity compared with the forecast in the medium term ... Our competitive position at home and abroad is seriously impaired in the medium term whilst we carry the fixed costs associated with this imbalance ... In view of the wide margin of capacity compared with demand there appears to be adequate cover should the demand forecasts turn out to be substantially understated. It then follows that any new arc capacity would have to be balanced by closure of existing modern arc capacity elsewhere, and I would find it difficult to support any proposal for expenditure on increasing arc steelmaking capacity in the foreseeable future.²⁶

²⁶ Memo from J. Pennington to R. Scholey, 27 April 1978, MRC, 755/4/4/5, pp. 1-2.

He once again broke consultation procedure by advising the men to request union leaders negotiate advanced redundancy terms on their behalf. In a move designed to heap further pressure on employees, Pennington also declared that he had already asked Scholey to place Bilston on the agenda for BSC's May 1978 TUCSICC meeting. It is clear the failure of the JWP exercise, which entailed hundreds of man-hours, was entirely inevitable. As was the case with Elisabeth, management evaluated the impact of closure on the narrow criteria of reducing capacity and improving cash-flow.

Closing the meeting, Pennington made a point of thanking those workers, "who had remained" and listened to him, "in a reasonable and rational way".²⁷ This particular comment was aimed at Turner who, anticipating the judgement, had interrupted proceedings with a prepared statement:

We the Committee resolved unanimously this morning to inform him [Pennington] that whatever his recommendations, the status quo should be retained at the Bilston Works until 1982 plus, in line with the statement of Sir Charles Villiers on Friday 26th November, 1976.²⁸

The action committee leader then announced that he no longer placed any credence to anything promulgated by The Mount, before leading a mass walkout of shop stewards.

²⁷ Minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting of the Bilston Works Council, 28 April 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/6.

²⁸ BJUAC statement to Bilston Works Council, undated, ITSOE, BCA1/2.

The men had by now become frustrated by the worsening behaviour of divisional management, with the rejection of the JWP plan being the latest in a series of moves designed to create what was described locally as an “embryo closure situation”.²⁹ As management distracted the men with an entirely fruitless planning exercise, they were determined to rundown the works by backdoor means. In February 1978, for example, local engineers discovered parts of Elisabeth had been secretly removed and reportedly sold for scrap – despite a previous joint agreement stipulating she would be maintained in full working order. The next month, David Hunter was transferred to Rotherham, leaving the Blast Furnace Department rudderless and the BJUAC without a vital ally. A formal complaint was ignored by Pennington, as were repeated requests for a copy of the divisional order book. At the JWP meeting in Sheffield, the Managing Director had resorted to lying about consulting Bilston’s customer base over their future intentions. A letter, written by Sheffield Division’s Head of Sales after the talks had taken place, revealed no such survey had yet been carried out:

Without prejudicing or anticipating the final decision, it would be prudent for us to consult with each customer separately about the continued sourcing of his orders from other parts of the Corporation. There is a clear realisation on our part that any transfer of orders must take with it the maintenance and improvement of customer service in its widest sense, i.e. flexibility, delivery accuracy, quality assurance.³⁰

²⁹ Letter from J. Clarke to W. Sirs, 21 April 1978, MRC, MSS.36/2000/282.

³⁰ Letter from D. Houghton to unknown, 28 April 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/6.

These and many other acts of deception caused an irreparable breach of trust, with local shop stewards from here on in referring to divisional management as the 'Sheffield Mafia'. As the principal protagonist in Bilston's downfall, Pennington assumed the role of pantomime villain throughout the remainder of the campaign. Following the mass walkout, he developed an intense personal rivalry with Turner, who called for his Managing Director's dismissal on several occasions. He was eventually christened 'Captain Bumblington' by some of the men, on account of a partial stutter and his resemblance to an army drill sergeant.

Approaching the TUCSICC

Although the JWP experiment ended in disappointment, it would have a major impact on the future direction of the BJUAC. The experience prompted the establishment of a leadership team that chiefly consisted of:

- John Booth, TGWU
- George Burgess, ISTC
- Graham Fazey, ISTC
- Bob Higgins, ISTC
- Graham Howe, TGWU
- Ian 'Knocker' McCulloch, ISTC
- Frank Robinson, UCATT
- Malkit Singh NUB
- Reg Turley, ISTC
- Bert Turner, ISTC

- Dennis Turner, ISTC
- Ted Wall, ISTC³¹

Henceforth, the BJUAC would be dominated by production workers, the bulk of which were employed in and around the finishing end or ancillary departments. This area of the works was known for its tight-knit social fabric, with production workers adopting a buddy system that encouraged sectional solidarity. Bert Turner describes the kinship that had developed there:

You were going to work with your mates, you worked as a team. If you were working the Sunday you would have a day off in the week – and you would have people who went off together. Some went fishing or golfing or to the horse race, whatever sports you were interested in.³²

Although many of their supporters had left under the May 1975 and January 1976 agreements, the overall authority of the BJUAC does not appear to have diminished. The men all held senior positions within local trade union apparatus whilst, as branch officials, they represented every major section of the works. Sharing uniform values and political outlooks, the action committee would now function as an incredibly coherent campaigning unit.

³¹ Although the likes of David Hamilton and Jack Jones would continue to back the campaign, they weren't considered to be full-time members of the BJUAC leadership team.

³² *The Express and Star*, 4 July 2012.

With the rejection of the JWP report, they sought to remobilise their network of political supporters. Bob Edwards and a delegation of West Midland Labour MPs met with Labour Party officials in London, only to be told the Government had no intention of interfering with BSC's development plans following the publication of the Road to Viability. Ally Tony Benn, now Energy Minister, lobbied his former department, prompting an indifferent response from Gerald Kaufman:

Les Huckfield and I met a delegation from the works led by Bob Edwards MP and Councillor Denis [sic] Turner. I explained to the delegation that the BSC currently faces very serious problems owing to the worldwide recession in the demand for steel, and the substantial overcapacity in the industry in this country and overseas. The situation was described in some detail in the Government's recent White Paper "British Steel Corporation: The Road to Viability" (Cmnd 7149), which also set out the action which will be required for dealing with the problems of the industry. The White Paper made clear that the Government has accepted that a number of steelworks will need to close and stated that it will be for BSC to begin negotiations on this. The White Paper also made clear that no action will be taken without prior consultation with the TUC Steel Committee and the local workforces. I understand that the Corporation have recently begun discussions with the unions on the future of the works, and that these discussions have not yet been completed.³³

Earlier chapters of this thesis have outlined how the BJUAC had come to rely on a political lobby to successfully petition policymakers on their behalf. Now a vastly

³³ Letter from G. Kaufman to A. Benn, 23 May 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

altered landscape would force its leadership to reappraise their strategic framework. As the above letter confirms, absolutely no action could be taken at plant-level without prior consultation with national union leaders. By closely inspecting the TUCSICC's February 1978 defence policy, which determined no further closures would be sanctioned by Congress House without the full consent of the workforce, the Bilston men focused their energies on securing the support of the Steel Committee unions. This shift in policy was outlined in a letter written by Edwards:

We [the BJUAC] have met the Ministers concerned, the West Midlands Group of Labour MPs on three occasions, the Wolverhampton Council Committee dealing with unemployment problems and the Steel Committee of the TUC. Everything has been done to state the case for the retention of the steel works at Bilston. The major concentration should be on the trade union side, where the major decisions will be made by the TUC Steel Committee in consultation with the British Steel Corporation. They should refuse to agree with BSC to the closure of the Bilston plant and if necessary create a crisis situation in this regard.³⁴

The first step in this tactical transition was to secure the backing of the regional trade union movement. Following talks in Birmingham, the action committee obtained the support of the CSEU, with one leading official hitting out at what he perceived to be widespread shop-floor apathy towards job cuts.³⁵

³⁴ Letter from R. Edwards to J. Miles, 5 June 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/3.

³⁵ Founded in December 1890 as the Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Trades, by 1978 the Confederation was made up of approximately 23 affiliates and 2.4m members.

They do not appear to be unduly bothered about the job cutbacks which are being announced in this area nearly every day. There is apathy amongst the shop stewards. They do not appear to want to do anything about this serious situation until they find themselves under threat of being made redundant. By then it is too late. The fight for survival in the Midlands is on now.³⁶

Also lending his support was Sir David Perris, Secretary of the West Midlands TUC, who agreed to ask his General Council to place pressure on Congress House. Meanwhile, the BJUAC established a close working relationship with the WB&DTUC. The body's senior management committee, which was dominated by a group of militant shop stewards linked to the AUEW and the TGWU, were looking to draw public attention to the ongoing retrenchment of the area's industrial base. Following a series of meetings arranged by Turner and Edwards, Trades Council leaders agreed to petition TUC President Len Murray:

We therefore wish you to support and make representation to HM Government to: Immediately instruct British Steel Corporation management to maintain the Bilston plant in full production and to programme modernisation; protect the public sector of the steel industry by controlling imports and ensuring that the private sector is not granted any favours or privileges not readily available to the public sector.³⁷

³⁶ *The Express and Star*, 11 May 1978.

³⁷ Letter from S. Clarke to L. Murray, 26 May 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/3.

The WB&DTUC subsequently organised a conference of approximately 40 local senior conveyors. A large number were employed at Black Country manufacturing firms that relied on Bilston for their semi-finished steel. A resolution opposing the Corporation's recent actions was immediately forwarded to the TUCSICC:

There is a strong feeling of resentment towards BSC and the manner they propose of affecting that closure, for to us we cannot conceive that a company, that shows high profitability, high class products, but above all, all round good industrial relations should be shut down.³⁸

The TGWU branch at Wolverhampton's Qualcast foundry, itself under the threat of closure, registered concerns over the future of the region's diminishing manufacturing base:

This branch is extremely concerned at the situation in the steel industry, particularly with the situation in Bilston. We feel that many more jobs other than the steel workers being threatened, will be lost. It is our view that our area will become extremely depressed, with widespread unemployment if the threatened closure takes place ... The people of Bilston will not stand by and watch their livelihood being taken from them.³⁹

Meanwhile, AUEW officials at each of GKN's West Midland facilities helped publicise a petition signed by thousands of Black Country trade unionists:

³⁸ Letter from W. Little to D. Turner, 23 May 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/3.

³⁹ Letter from J. Miles to R. Edwards, undated, WCA, DW-173/1/3.

Our members stand rock firmly behind your cause, and hope that the efforts of your action committee and indeed the Bilston population will meet with complete success and a reversal of the Steel Board's decision will be a reward for everyone's efforts.⁴⁰

The BJUAC itself looked to secure Steel Committee support for their recently rejected electric arc proposal. Each member thereby petitioned their respective full-time trade union officials. Anthony Tudor, a regional organiser with the TGWU, wrote to his General Secretary Moss Evans:

Our Shop Stewards are also of the confirmed opinion that Sheffield Special Steels Division are using the Bilston plant as the whipping block, despite the fact that Bilston has been the biggest contributor to profits to one division that has remained profitable even during the steel recession. I am now even more convinced than ever of the fear that I have expressed to you on a number of occasions that British Steel are attempting to enforce closure of Plants by back door methods, thereby making nonsense of the negotiations taking place at National Level between the Steel Committee and the Corporation.⁴¹

He subsequently called on his Executive to rebuff any hint of a negotiated closure from Grosvenor Place. Assistance was also provided by Andrew Chudley (NUB), David Beards (UCATT) and Greg Bamber (SIMA), all Area Officers of the unions represented

⁴⁰ Letter from H. Penny to D. Turner, 3 February 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/3.

⁴¹ Letter from A. Tudor to R. Harrison, undated, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

on the BJUAC. On the ISTC side, Divisional Officer Jack Gavin lobbied Bill Sirs tirelessly. The experienced Teessider, who had resided in the Black Country for over a decade, was particularly close to Dennis Turner and Reg Turley. Crucially, he had the ear of the Confederation top brass, recently assuming the position of acting General Secretary whilst Sirs recovered from illness.

A sustained period of intensive lobbying prompted TUCSICC Secretary Dennis Delay to meet with a Bilston deputation in London. Armed with an abridged version of the JWP report, the two-part plantwide resolution and a transcript of Charles Villiers' pledge, the BJUAC leaders confirmed they were seeking to block any attempt by Congress House and Grosvenor Place to open rundown discussions before March 1982, the date cited in their Chairman's November 1976 speech.⁴² Convinced by the strength of their argument, Delay encouraged the Bilston men to petition his Steel Committee bosses in person.

With trademark enthusiasm, Turner and his colleagues went one step further, working alongside his newfound allies in the Black Country labour movement to organise a huge demonstration they labelled the 'March on London'. On the morning of the May 1978 national talks, a convoy of coaches transported hundreds of Bilston's steelworkers into central London. Arriving at daybreak, they disembarked at Speaker's Corner, where they listened to another passionate call to arms from their leader:

⁴² Minutes of TUCSICC meeting, 11 May 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

There really is something immoral about it. Bilston has always made a profit since nationalisation and for some years before. There is a big market for Bilston steel in the Midlands, but the Corporation had used Bilston's profits to build new plants elsewhere. The fundamental point is, why should people and plants which have been making a profit and a contribution to the industry have to be put on this sacrificial altar? We are prepared to ask that question and they will have a bloody hard job answering it.⁴³

The address ended with a warning to management: their recent behaviour had aroused extremely hostile feelings amongst his colleagues and their supporters. Turner's fiery address was met with loud cheers from a crowd swelled by a contingent of Black Country trade unionists ferried in by the WB&DTUC. The protest then snaked its way down Gray's Inn Road and onwards to ISTC headquarters.

Upon witnessing the throbbing mass of placard waving demonstrators forcing morning rush-hour traffic to a standstill, Sirs agreed to grant an audience to a small delegation of fraternal brothers. In what was a crucial encounter, the General Secretary confirmed his EC's formal support for new electric arc steelmaking at Bilston, later telling *The Guardian* that management would "run into a bit of trouble" if they looked to unilaterally rundown the works.⁴⁴ The demonstrators made their way to Congress House, where TUCSICC officials were handed an abridged version of the JWP report and a copy of their petition.

⁴³ *The Guardian*, 10 May 1978.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

The steel union chiefs, impressed by the sophistication of the survival plan, agreed to formally push for new steelmaking apparatus at Bilston when speaking with policymakers later that day. One Steel Committee member, seemingly impressed by the protest taking place outside, called on his colleagues, “to make a stand against all further closures”.⁴⁵ The men, meanwhile, headed to BSC headquarters, where Turner berated senior industry officials:

We are not going to allow Bilston steel works to be led like a sacrificial lamb to the slaughter ... We do not believe that our plant should be made the scapegoat for the mistakes British Steel has made in the past, because the Bilston works has consistently made a profit.⁴⁶

They then held a symbolic vigil in memory of Elisabeth; only breaking the silence to applaud the arrival of their General Secretaries.

Inside, Sirs used the results of the JWP’s customer survey to repudiate John Pennington’s unsubstantiated claims over the future of Bilston’s orderbook.⁴⁷ Hector Smith, known for his baiting of Corporation officials, recited Villiers’ November 1976 pledge. As Pennington floundered, the ISTC contingent asked why management appeared so determined to shut a high-performance unit that, with minor investment, could secure much needed profits? The Corporation team, seemingly taken aback by their counterparts’ newfound resilience, had no answer. Forced onto the backfoot,

⁴⁵ Minutes of TUCSICC meeting, 11 May 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

⁴⁶ *The Express and Star*, 11 May 1978.

⁴⁷ Minutes of meeting between the TUCSICC and BSC, 11 May 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/12.

Bob Scholey looked to move discussions onto Glengarnock, another plant he had in his sights. Regarding Bilston, BSC's hatchet man agreed to establish a JPC with the unions to conjointly investigate the merits of the men's recently spurned investment proposal.⁴⁸

The BJUAC would have been pleased by events in London. Firstly, they had received the formal backing of the industry's most powerful trade union leaders, with Sirs appearing particularly sympathetic to their plight. Secondly, their survival plan would be re-examined by a joint panel consisting of influential trade unionists and national planners. Meanwhile, the impact of the March on London was felt locally. Since Pennington's November 1977 statement, a malaise appears to have descended on the shop-floor. This manifested itself in several ways. At a meeting of the JWP a month later, the works Melting Shop Manager Bryn Jones revealed he had received very little cooperation from some of his men.⁴⁹ Worryingly, the exceptionally high standards of Bilston's customarily diligent workforce had dropped considerably, with delivery rates reaching an all-time low of 80 per cent. The change in mood was expressed in more abstruse shop-floor behaviour. Head of Security, David Hamilton, complained to *The Steel News* about a spate of thefts carried out by disenfranchised workers. Ignoring repeated calls to stop, the number of incidents merely increased.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ The idea of establishing a formal joint body had previously been mooted by both the TUCSICC and BSC, with the Bilston dispute prompting both sides to act. The Committee's overall brief was wide-ranging, though it would initially focus on forensically examining the Bilston's men's counterproposal. As this thesis will reveal, the JPC proved an entirely fruitless endeavour that enabled management and, to a lesser extent the unions, to dilute rank and file protest.

⁴⁹ First meeting of the Technical Sub-Committee of the JWP, 2 December 1977, ITSOE, BCA1/2.

⁵⁰ Ignoring Hamilton's warning, a group of workers stole copper piping from the main amenity block. See *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 17 March 1978.

Hamilton wasn't the only one registering concerns at the mindset of rank and file workers. The Works Accountant, Dave Anderson, warned the BJUAC that it was the men – and not divisional management – who were now undermining Bilston's overall financial performance.⁵¹ More troubling and, in a sign of what was to come only a year later, some steelworkers on the GWW had begun glancing enviously at redundancy packages negotiated elsewhere.

Reflecting on the mindset of Bilston's production workers at this stage of the campaign, it is evident that they were displaying what Richard Hyman has identified as "unorganised conflict", leading to a spontaneous and partial "withdrawal from work":

The evidence indicates that absenteeism, bad time-keeping, turnover, low productivity, and even industrial accidents, can represent conscious or unconscious responses to discontents which derive from identifiable features in the work situation ... Individual sabotage, indiscipline and various forms of withdrawal from work typically involve spontaneous individual action – or reaction – in the face of uncongenial work relations.⁵²

Seeking to exploit this changing situation was a small group of shop stewards linked to the Joint Staff Branches. Following the mothballing of Lizzie and the subsequent rejection of the JWP report, these men had seemingly adopted a lukewarm attitude towards the BJUAC leadership team. Moderate in nature, they had refused to

⁵¹ First meeting of the Personnel Sub-Committee of the JWP, 20 February 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/2, p. 4.

⁵² Hyman, *Industrial Relations*, pp. 187-190.

participate in the April 1978 mass walkout, with one dissenter openly disputing the authority of Turner and his collaborators:

Mr. Frank Wall (a trades union representative who stayed behind when the other trades unionists walked out) stated that he shared the concern of the other trades unionists but that he did not think the statement made by Mr. Turner was entirely correct in as much as the workforce were prepared to stay here if necessary until 1982. There was a lot of apathy at Bilston at the moment, and Mr. Wall felt that if it was put to the actual workforce, as opposed to the leaders, of closure or negotiation, then the workforce would go for closure.⁵³

The mutineer subsequently prepared a report attacking the direction of the campaign:

The purpose of this paper is an attempt to present an assessment of the situation as seen by an employee who shares the concern of fellow employees but who harbours the belief that the present policies being pursued by the Action Committee require examination and accountability.⁵⁴

The three-page document provided a scathing critique of the BJUAC and steel union bureaucrats, calling on co-workers to independently seek a negotiated early closure agreement in exchange for generous redundancy terms:

⁵³ Minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting of the Bilston Works Council, 28 April 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/2.

⁵⁴ Frank Wall Paper, undated, ITSOE, BCA1/3.

Reluctantly we must prepare for the worst and this is precisely what the Action Committee are not doing. Quite simply they are concentrating their efforts to the benefit of a minority of the workforce to the exclusion of the majority. If common sense is to prevail, this imbalance has to be recognised and corrective measures taken. Meaningful negotiations must be entered into to obtain the highest compensation available for the majority of the workforce (if not all of us) who will inevitably be deprived of their employment.⁵⁵

At this stage at least, the small band of rebels seem to have had very little influence on production workers, with recent events in London legitimising the BJUAC's overall authority. The national demonstration had galvanised the wider workforce, producing a sense of purpose not witnessed since the response to the May 1975 and January 1976 agreements. Days later, when a major breakdown of equipment threatened production, Bilston's revitalised steelmen worked around the clock in atrocious and dangerous conditions to maintain current production levels. This vital intervention prompted management to praise their commitment and bravery:

Their efforts have won admiration and thanks from myself and other managers. Few men, having received the kind of news which Bilston has had in the past few weeks would have shown such spirit and worked such long hours in atrocious conditions ... and without a word of complaint. If anyone deserves a reward it is these men ... Everyone associated with the work deserves the highest praise. They were often covered from head to toe in oil, and conditions underfoot were very bad. But they worked long, slogging hours

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

without complaint ... The attitude of the people who worked on both these problems was one which is not often found in the industry today. They pulled out all the stops, worked in very dirty conditions, and put with personal hardships to see the job through.⁵⁶

The Loss of Shelton

As Bilston's steelmen moved onto a new chapter in their defence, their Shelton colleagues finally succumbed to defeat following a spirited campaign of resistance. The Government-backed decision to cancel Beswick's electric arc steelmaking scheme had prompted Bob Scholey to notify national union leaders of his intention to permanently shut the North Staffordshire works by June 1978. The TUCSICC's immediate response was to seek to block any such action.⁵⁷ But BSC were steadfast in their position. Ignoring multiple requests from Congress House to delay taking unilateral action, new Director of Social Policy, Dr. David Grieves, castigated steel union leaders for dragging their feet.⁵⁸ When Eric Varley refused to intervene, management merely went over the heads of the unions by negotiating a closure agreement at plant-level, a tactic previously employed at Hartlepool. These events brutally exposed the underlying flaws of the Steel Committee's 'wait and see' approach to defending individual works. With union leaders dillydallying, BSC could simply target vulnerable sections of a battle-fatigued shop-floor.

⁵⁶ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 9 June 1978.

⁵⁷ Minutes of TUCSICC meeting, 13 April 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

⁵⁸ Minutes of meeting between the TUCSICC and BSC, 7 June 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

The Shelton affair caused a degree anxiety at Bilston, with some raising concerns that indecisiveness at executive level could undermine the overall effectiveness of the defence campaign.⁵⁹ They were entirely correct in their assumption. With the TUCSICC distracted by events in Shelton, management made their move in the Black Country. John Pennington, having recovered from his humiliation at the last round of talks, unexpectedly contacted union officials. The first half of his *communique* again focused on refuting the JWP report's market share argument:

148 out of 150 customers from Bilston are already receiving supplies from other works in the Corporation, to whom the order book would be transferred. The large sizes which used to be unique to Bilston works can be supplied from other works, which has a similar primary mill and has established that the size range can be rolled. The response from customers following the debate in the media over the future of Bilston works has been encouraging, the underlying theme being that they wish to be associated with a supply from the most modern and competitive process route. It is felt that any loss of tonnage would be marginal if properly managed and thus the full benefit of the reduction in fixed costs obtained.⁶⁰

Despite Bilston's future still being discussed separately by the JPC, management were looking to secure a negotiated closure at plant-level by the end of July 1978, with Pennington even preparing a provisional rundown timetable. The Mount was willing

⁵⁹ The action committee leaders possessed an intimate knowledge of the events surrounding Shelton's closure, having agreed to establish a formal alliance with the plant's WAC only weeks prior.

⁶⁰ Letter from J. Pennington to D. Delay, 30 May 1978, MRC, 755/4/4/4.

to maintain current production levels until the summer shutdown (21 July – 6 August 1978), when operations would be halved. Steelmaking was to end the next month, with the mills closing in April 1979. Having been frustrated by the strength of resistance, BSC were clearly seeking to force their will.

The BJUAC responded by calling an emergency summit of senior shop stewards, who unanimously rejected the Pennington proposal. With their fates in the hands of the TUCSICC, they requested national leaders visit the Black Country to discuss a potential dual strategy:

In view of the recent developments regarding the Bilston and Shelton Plants, the Joint Union Liaison Committee have resolved to invite yourself, and the full membership of the TUC Steel Committee to an urgent meeting here at the Bilston Plant as soon as arrangements can be made. We do believe that it is imperative that TUC Steel Committee should discuss with us urgently any contingency plans that are being made for the support and defence of the Bilston plant in the likelihood of a precipitate move by BSC to close Bilston.⁶¹

Although Bill Sirs vowed the TUCSICC wouldn't be "panicked" into any decision by the Corporation, he rejected the invitation, suggesting it would be "inappropriate" to meet at such an early stage.⁶² Unperturbed, the Bilston men called on Jack Gavin to push

⁶¹ Letter from D. Turner to W. Sirs, 11 June 1978, MRC, MSS.36/2000/225.

⁶² Letter from W. Sirs to D. Turner, 14 June 1978, MRC, MSS.36/2000/225.

for a meeting, only to be informed that the Steel Committee leader was far too busy preparing for his union's forthcoming ADC.⁶³

This was not the first time the Bilston men had been exposed to Sirs' capricious behaviour. In January 1978, Gavin scribed an urgent letter to Swinton House titled 'No.4 Division Closures'; requesting his Executive made an "urgent arrangement" to visit the Black Country in view of the, "deteriorating morale" of local workers.⁶⁴ This was followed by an even more desperate plea, "Further to my letter of 27th January much as I hate having to add to your current intolerable work load I would be obliged if you could [sic] some dates for visits to the above plants [Bilston, Shelton and Cookley]".⁶⁵ Weeks earlier, in the wake of Elisabeth's mothballing, the BJUAC had travelled down to London to speak to a pre-arranged meeting with the TUCSICC. Upon arrival, they were informed that Sirs had pulled out at the very last minute. Such elusiveness would eventually prompt Dennis Delay to complain:

The ISTC Conference is this week and I do not know what will emerge as Mr Sirs communicates nothing to anybody. I am thinking about what advice to give the Committee. The main problems in the way of getting any co-ordinated action are, as you known, Mr Sirs' uncooperative attitude and his prolonged absences from his office and from this country, which have helped to give any

⁶³ Letter from J. Gavin to D. Turner, 21 June 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

⁶⁴ Letter from J. Gavin to W. Sirs, 27 January 1978, MRC, MSS.36/2000/225.

⁶⁵ Letter from J. Gavin to W. Sirs, 3 February 1978, MRC, MSS.36/2000/225.

even more bitter edge to the Corporation's attitude than would otherwise be the case.⁶⁶

The December 1977 Congress House meeting raised questions over the often-dysfunctional manner in which steel union leaders operated. David Hunter, as a member of a non-TUC affiliated trade union, was refused entry. The Blast Furnace Manager, who would have offered a valuable insight into the controversy surrounding the recent 'Big Lizzie' decision, was forced to suffer the indignity of waiting outside. Following the talks, sympathetic ISTC EC member Eric Wilson expressed his frustration at the behaviour of some of his steel union colleagues:

Any [rundown or closure] proposals should be presented jointly at a properly constituted meeting between local management and the workers concerned with Divisional Officers in attendance, and if at the 'end of the day' these proposals are unacceptable to the workers at the plant, both the TUCSICC and the ISTC Executive Council have previously resolved to resist the closure by every means at their disposal. I will object to any attempt to whitewash and water down that commitment unless some measure of agreement has already been reached with the workers concerned.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ TUC inter-departmental correspondence, D. Delay to L. Murray, 19 June 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.432/43.

⁶⁷ Letter from E. Wilson to G. Fazey, 18 December 1977, WCA, DW-173/1/2.

Another warning would come from the Scunthorpe action committee, who advised the Bilston men against placing their fates in the hands of steel union bureaucrats and, instead, recruit the support of the British shop steward movement:

Last year, when I was talking to Joe Herbertson of Sheffield, I made a prediction, that if the Bilston action committee was only prepared to work through the established channels, procedure, etc, then Bilston was finished! ... I urgently request that now you and your committee act unreasonably and irresponsibly but I fear that it may be too late. Your committee should now concentrate all its available expertise in creating maximum publicity for your case and maximum embarrassment for the BSC and T/U leadership. This can be done in numerous ways but I will stress that they can be effective outside of the steel industry ... I realise only too well that you and your committee will have had a belly-full of well-meaning advice from all sorts of well-meaning people but I hope, sincerely, that you will treat this letter differently. I'm afraid you have indulged in the usual format:- lobbying of MPs, questions in the House, tea and sympathy from the T/U leadership, tea and sympathy from Varley and Kaufman, sympathy from the middle-class university intellectuals, but honestly – to what avail! The system can accommodate all of the above and really loves it!!⁶⁸

As was the case at Shotton and Corby, the Scunthorpe men had continued to distance themselves from their union leaders. Those WAC leaders who aligned with Congress House, on the other hand, were left unimpressed with the support they received.

⁶⁸ Letter from P. Johnson to D. Turner, 18 March 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

Shelton's steelmen, for example, had fallen out with Hector Smith and the NUB, whilst the East Moors WAC would later take legal action against Swinton House for the advice they had received during their abortive campaign.

Conversely, it appears the BJUAC were willing to overlook such warning signs, instead seeking to establish a much closer working relationship with the Steel Committee and Sirs in particular. It is evident that any specific concerns were assuaged by some of the campaign leaders' previous personal dealings with the General Secretary. As an ISTC stalwart, Reg Turley had sat alongside the then Divisional Officer on the organisation's CNC for almost a decade. Similarly, Dennis Turner felt indebted to a fraternal brother who had repeatedly supported his burgeoning political career. As a member of the Confederation's Parliamentary Panel, Sirs sponsored his Bilston member's recent general election bids. Turner was also impressed by the handful of interactions he had had with Sirs since the latter's promotion to General Secretary. During a 1976 conference in Sheffield, he witnessed the ISTC leader deliver a speech pledging to protect all viable older works. The next year, accepting a personal invitation from local shop stewards to speak at Bilston, he made a well-received presentation on how his Executive planned to minimise the impact new technologies would have on manning levels. Weeks later, the Bilston man revealed his growing admiration for the General Secretary by describing a Labour Party conference speech as both "spirited" and "valuable".⁶⁹ Then, when responding to the mothballing of Elisabeth, Sirs had scripted a national resolution that provided a great deal of assurance for his anxious Bilston members:

⁶⁹ D. Turner, Report on Annual Conference of the Labour Party, undated, WCA, DW-173/1/10.

The General Secretary reported on correspondence which had been passed between this Action Committee and the Prime Minister concerning the decision to moth-ball the blast furnace at Bilston, and after consideration it was resolved: - 'That the Executive Council give all support and help possible to this Committee in their fight to maintain jobs at the Bilston Works'.⁷⁰

In January 1978, with press rumours circulating over Bilston's short-term future, Sirs granted Turner and Turley a personal hearing, during which he vowed to persuade his fellow Steel Committee officials to oppose any prospective move by management. Responding, an appreciative BJUAC Chairman proclaimed, "The action committee hope everyone here will take great encouragement from what Mr Sirs has promised us".⁷¹ Four months later, in the aftermath of the March on London, Turner penned a message to his General Secretary, expressing his sincerest gratitude for the manner in which he had welcomed the Bilston delegation during their visit.⁷² The admiration Turner and Turley had for union headquarters was clear.

Notwithstanding this, recent events at Shelton had led to concerns amongst some of Bilston's more sceptical shop stewards over Congress House's approach to defending individual sites. The action committee would look to force the TUCSICC's hand by engineering a national debate around the Corporation's updated closure programme. The ISTC's ADC in June 1978 provided the ideal platform.

⁷⁰ Minutes of ISTC EC meeting, 16-18 November 1977, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

⁷¹ *The Express and Star*, 13 January 1978.

⁷² An emphatic Turner described the Steel Committee's decision to block BSC's closure proposal as an "important milestone" in the defence campaign. See Letter from D. Turner to W. Sirs, undated, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

The Bonfire of all Conventions

On day one of the ADC, approximately 150 delegates, including Graham Fazey, David Hamilton and Dennis Turner, listened intently as keynote speaker, Sir Charles Villiers, pushed his overcapacity/overmanning argument for rationalisation:

We can't do it unless the Corporation becomes competitive internationally. If we are not competitive I'll tell you what will happen. The customers will certainly drift away to other suppliers. Our market share will fall. The business will go. Our losses will mount. Parliament and the people will lose patience with us or cut off our money supply. And what would happen to us? We'd wither on the bough and all jobs would be like autumn leaves, crumbling and blown away ... Unless we do improve performance throughout the whole of the BSC, as we've already done in some vital areas, the future of bulk steelmaking in this country is in danger and it's in doubt and jeopardy.⁷³

As ironic groans filled the auditorium, it was clear that the man the BJUAC were calling 'Mr Pastry' (on account of his tendency to crumble under pressure) had completely underestimated the mood of workers still reeling over recent closures. During an extraordinarily awkward encounter, Bill Sirs presented him with a handcrafted figurine produced by a Shelton-based artist. In a response that would later come to haunt him, Villiers pledged that no action would be taken at any other threatened works without full and meaningful consultation. With the pleasantries over, the ADC could get down

⁷³ *Man and Metal*, July/August 1978.

to business, with delegates debating a first round of resolutions that, unsurprisingly, focused on rationalisation. Seeking to drive proceedings, Hamilton tabled an emergency motion calling on his EC to:

THIS Conference calls upon the Executive Council to formulate contingency plans immediately in order to protect members of this Union against further contractions of the Steel Industry outside of the Beswick proposals and that this Union informs the Steel Committee and the Trades Union Congress General Council of its intentions to support the Bilston Steel workers' fight for survival. It requests that all unions involved will in no way handle materials or orders diverted in such a way as to expedite the closure of Bilston or any other non-Beswick plant.⁷⁴

In a passionate oratory, the accomplished public speaker asserted, "human considerations had now taken a backseat to BSC's master plan", before reminding delegates of the insanity of a loss-making company deliberately undermining a profitable unit. Referring specifically to the decision to mothball Elisabeth, he asked fellow delegates, "Brothers if you were responsible for the loss of £0.75m how long would you have a job?". When outlining the devastating impact BSC's, "Roman strategy of divide and rule" was having on British steelworkers, the Little Leprechaun urged each of the steel unions to unite against closures, "Do we have to be picked off one at a time? Let us tell the TUCSICC: No more unemployment – it's just not on".

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

The rallying cry had an immediate impact, with a long line of delegates approaching the rostrum offering to assist their fraternal brothers at Bilston. A member of the Glengarnock WAC called on steel union leaders to, “finally take a stand and say to the BSC that we’ve had enough: halt the threat of closures to the non-Beswick plants”.⁷⁵ Another demanded the Steel Committee involve themselves in policymaking by pushing for investment in mini-works:

Communities that depend on steel cannot be left out. Those with high unemployment levels could well be projected far higher. There are quite a number in this position. These plants need development because they can make products many of the bigger units can’t. The emergency resolution of Bilston shows the trend ... it was not just industries but communities that were threatened. For a small amount of money, a future for both could be secured.⁷⁶

After contributions from several rank and file members, Alan Farley, the recently elected West Midlands Executive member, sought to whip up EC support for the Bilston motion:

BSC’s central order loading policy allowed them to use companies as farms. Bilston has been consistently profitable since nationalisation. Its last five years total profit was £22.1m; in the last two years £8.9m. Even this year there would have been £3m profit had not BSC cut Bilston’s legs away by

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

mothballing the furnace after an expensive reline. Performance had always been top class and disputes had not caused a real loss of production since nationalisation. Few BSC plants could match their 90 per cent on-time delivery record.⁷⁷

The Stourbridge man then turned towards Villiers and proceeded to read out an excerpt from his November 1976 speech:

I think Bilston [is] super ... The way you work together and the speed in which you work are absolutely right ... I promise you that the BSC is at Bilston to stay ... We are not going to abandon it ... there is nowhere else in the Corporation ... so close to the industrial markets ... You have a super business here. Run it as hard as it will go and keep it going as hard and as long as it will go.⁷⁸

Amidst a chorus of ironic cheers and boos, a red-faced senior industry official demanded the right to reply, only to be ordered to stand-down by conference organisers. Emboldened, one shop steward declared:

If anybody thinks that they're going to close Bilston and move through this industry like a bulldozer picking off plants, whether they be Beswick or non-Beswick, then think again!

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

By presenting the emergency motion, Bilston's shop stewards hoped to create a situation whereby union leaders were given little option but to act on the demands of an increasingly anxious rank and file membership. The tactic appeared to have worked. When voting for the resolution himself, Sirs admitted that the time had come for the TUCSICC to take a stand:

The emergency resolution means taking action over transfer of orders. This was the voice of the industry's workers. While he did not want to engage in a wholesale strike, this resolution gave the power to do it. "If you're passing that motion unanimously I shall see to it that it's given the full treatment it deserves. You don't have to worry about me.

The BJUAC would have been extremely satisfied with day one of the conference. Not only had they received the formal backing of 150 senior convenors from across the UK, but also the entire leadership of the industry's largest union. Nevertheless, an opportunity to secure an even greater strategic coup now presented itself. As Turner entered the lobby of Scarborough's Grand Hotel on the final morning, he was in possession of a copy of a confidential order from divisional management:

In view of the deteriorating trading situation, it has been necessary to review the plant loading across the Steelworks Group. I am required to prepare plans to support a two-furnace operation as from 6th August with a further proposal to stop steelmaking at Bilston at the end of October 1978. It will be necessary for us to meet formally to discuss these proposals and to reach an agreement on manning levels across the Traffic Department before implementation. It is

not our intention to declare any man redundant, all displaced workers will be paid guaranteed earnings according to Income & Security agreements until such time that the TUCSICC and the BSC have discussed and reached agreements on the future of Bilston Works and the future employment prospects of our workforce.⁷⁹

With the ISTC leadership otherwise engaged, The Mount had sought to force through John Pennington's rundown proposals in the Black Country. Rather than immediately report the instructions to conference organisers, a shrewd Turner appears to have patiently sat on the intelligence. Seeking to achieve the maximum possible impact, he waited until a lively debate was taking place on management's recent abuse of consultation procedures, before handing a startled Sirs the instruction. After the General Secretary read out what would be dubbed the 'Bilston letter', he opened the floor to ascertain the views of delegates. One of the first to speak was an unusually animated Jack Gavin, who sent a stark warning to his close friend and boss:

[I cannot] let this challenge go by without speaking from the rostrum in support of Bilston. The honour of the Confederation was at stake. Unless resistance was provided by this conference we might as well write ourselves off as a union.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Letter from R. Griffiths to J. Booth, 29 June 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/6.

⁸⁰ *Man and Metal*, July/August 1978. The Scotsman had been deeply affected by the loss of Shelton, leaving Bilston as the sole surviving state-owned iron and steelworks in his entire division.

The popular full-time official was joined at the rostrum by angry delegates, with one declaring:

... it was one thing to shut a plant through negotiation and consultation, but BSC were “treating us as the lowest form of animal. I’m saying now we’ll fight them, we’ll fight them all the way”.⁸¹

Such words clearly resonated with Confederation leaders, as influential EC member Graham Hett bemoaned decisionmakers’ unquenchable thirst for rationalisation:

What was happening to Bilston could happen to anyone whether in a Beswick or non-Beswick plant. The transfer of orders was the first step towards undermining a plant, leaving men operating one furnace for nothing. “Let us stand firm behind the people from Bilston and any other works that are prepared to stand firm themselves”.⁸²

Another top ISTC official asserted:

... the union had given BSC every consideration by demanning on a grand scale and supporting closures. “It still isn’t enough; the BSC want more, he added. “I think the BSC are cocking a snook at us and if we stand still and do

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.* Hett was a vastly experienced trade unionist, having been Secretary of the Hawarden Steel Committee for six years and a works representative at Shotton for fourteen years prior. As a Labour Councillor himself, he had developed an affinity with Dennis Turner. Unfortunately for the BJUAC, their close ally died as the battle for Bilston reached its final stage.

nothing about it, we deserve everything we get". After Bilston, Corby and Shotton would be next!⁸³

The intervention of these respected figures, combined with the mood of outraged delegates, left Sirs with little option but to act. Abandoning the entire ADC, he appeared to acknowledge that union apathy had negatively impacted traditional steelmaking communities:

I think you will recall that over the years since nationalisation, a nationalisation in which we asked for the industry to be handed to the people and run by the people, we have been subject to a lot of dictation. The people running this country have made good decisions and bad decisions, but we haven't had any part in them, although communities have suffered considerably, we have given all the assistance possible. We've seen a lot of suffering ... I've been through all this and it's heart-breaking to have to go through it, but nevertheless I've given this Corporation a tremendous amount of support in order to try and build for this country an industry that we can be proud of, that will live for a long, long time. I don't think I'm ashamed of what I've done in trying to build something.

Returning from an emergency session of his EC, he conceded that, with mounting rank and file anger over the Bilston letter, his reputation was now on the line:

⁸³ *Ibid.*

To be quite frank, I just cannot tolerate that situation now. With what's happened today at Bilston, it's been suggested by our Executive that the credibility of this Union is at stake. And the credibility of my position is at stake because I cannot continue to co-operate with leaders of the BSC if they are going to stand here on the rostrum as happened two days ago and tell us that never again will they have a Shelton, that never again will they take decisions until after there's been full consultation. The day following that statement they state very clearly that they intend to run down Bilston and close it by a certain date. That is absolutely not tolerable ...⁸⁴

Sirs then sought to placate angry delegates by ordering the first industrywide stoppage since the General Strike:

There's a deadline date on this letter of the August 6th, 1978, and we have to tell the Corporation that if it hasn't been removed by then, the industry will stop (Prolonged Applause and standing ovation) ... And if this industry does stop, let me tell you very clearly – I will stop steel moving in this country, there won't be an ounce of it moved. I shall inform the International Metalworkers right throughout the world that they must not send any steel here.⁸⁵

The shock announcement was met with a standing ovation from a relieved rank and file. Over the past seven years, steelworkers had heard much talk from leaders but very little action. This was an altogether different scenario. A day later, each

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

TUCSICC-affiliated union endorsed the ISTC's strike order; thereby placing Bilston at the centre of what its workforce hoped would be a new national defence strategy.

Conclusion

Working alongside local management, Bilston's dynamic shop stewards produced a sophisticated counterproposal outlining the commercial case for redevelopment, whilst coordinating an imaginative 'Think Customer' marketing campaign that reinforced the plant's viability. These local actions were, however, quickly overtaken by wider events at the centre. Consenting to management's crude overcapacity/overmanning argument, James Callaghan's under-fire Labour Government abandoned its earlier manifesto commitment to traditional steelmaking communities. Facing new political and economic realities, they authorised management to extend their rationalisation programme beyond Beswick. The short-term impact on Bilston's prospects were severe; ending any chance of the JWP's survival plan being sanctioned whilst encouraging BSC to engender an embryo closure situation on the ground. Moreover, the so-called 'golden handshake clause' meant that, in the long run, the defence campaign could now be decided by financial self-interest.

The use of record-breaking redundancy cheques was actively encouraged by steel union hierarchies who had assented to the Corporation's case for rationalisation. As a policy vacuum developed at executive level, an emboldened BSC negotiating team went above their heads and negotiated the closure of the final Beswick sites locally. With the Black Country plant in management's sights, a streamlined BJUAC was

forced to reappraise its entire strategic framework, pinning their colours firmly to the mast of the Steel Committee and its Chairman Bill Sirs.

However, whilst the support of union Executives galvanised Bilston's battle-weary workforce, some local shop stewards became concerned that Congress House's 'wait and see' approach to defending individual works could compromise their campaign. The enterprising action committee leadership, therefore, looked to shape overall policy from within. Scarborough was perhaps the high-point in the battle for Bilston, representing something of a strategic coup for local officials. Not only had they engineered a national debate around plant closures, they had prompted the first strike order since 1926.

These events appeared to have awoken the TUCSICC organisations from their collective slumbers. With the onus now on the union hierarchies, the Bilston men returned to the Black Country anticipating a complete overhaul of Congress House's defence strategy. As the next chapter will demonstrate, they were sorely mistaken. With the steel unions remaining hopelessly fractured, there would be no significant change in policy.

Chapter 6: Bottom Blown Steelmaking

This chapter provides an overview of the national landscape in the wake of the tumultuous events of June and July 1978. It begins by assessing the adequacy of the TUCSICC's conduct following management's retreat in light of Scarborough. Having been handed a platform from which to coordinate an effective collective response on behalf of the remaining older sites, it exposes how institutional conflict triggered yet another round of inactivity.

With a lack of organised resistance at the centre, the BJUAC were once more forced to seize the initiative for themselves. The chapter appraises local actions, establishing how Bilston's dynamic shop stewards remodelled their entire defence campaign. Spotting a potential loophole in the Road to Viability White Paper, they recruited outside expertise to assist them in formulating a new survival bid centred on a revolutionary production method that, if sanctioned, could safeguard the nation's remaining OH steelmaking plants. The chapter highlights the methods adopted by the Bilston men in order to generate momentum for their latest counterproposal, revealing how they oversaw a sophisticated national PR campaign that targeted the many intellectual and commercial flaws of the industry's state-sponsored rationalisation programme.

Having demonstrated how, after an intense round of lobbying, the BJUAC secured the support of customarily ambivalent TUCSICC officials, the chapter concludes with an assessment of BSC's response. It is revealed that management used a joint union consultation initiative to rebuff the men's survival bid, whilst continuing to undermine the Bilston plant in preparation for one final assault.

A Missed Opportunity

Within 24-hours of his national strike order, a resolute Bill Sirs led the TUCSICC into summit talks at Grosvenor Place. David Grieves revealed he had ordered the withdrawal of the 'Bilston letter' and the abandonment of divisional management's rundown schedule. John Pennington, whose sacking union officials were demanding, was told to maintain current production levels until the JPC had made its final decision. Although the Corporation urged these talks should take place as early as possible, Congress House called for a moratorium on all negotiations:

Given the formal withdrawal by the Corporation of the local letter and the effective withdrawal by the Corporation of the May 30 run-down timetable, the ISTC now withdraw its strike deadline. Further discussion about the future of Bilston and other works should be deferred until the JPC had been able to review the situation across-the-board. It would be inappropriate to seek to fix an early meeting of the JPC; what was now needed was a pause for consolidation.¹

Following the events at Scarborough, humiliated industry officials beat a hasty retreat, described by Congress House as an "absolute climb-down".² Steel union bureaucrats had been presented with an opportunity to formulate a meaningful response. Would they take it?

¹ Minutes of meeting between the TUCSICC and BSC, 30 June 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

² *The Irish Times*, 1 July 1978.

For a brief moment, at least, the signs were encouraging. Dennis Delay, who had been left frustrated by his employer's past ambivalence, mooted a list of potential policy options:

The Secretary suggested that the Committee would sooner or later have to decide what their stand on closure was going to be. Were they going to say that the suffering had reached its limit and there must be no more closures, notwithstanding arguments about BSC losses and so forth? Were they going to set themselves, as a Committee, to argue in great detail about the technical, economic, commercial and social implications of each closure? Or, as had just been suggested, were they going to press for a renewed Beswick exercise?³

Conceding that existing policy was "manifestly unsatisfactory", the TUCSICC agreed to, "reconcile its 'firefighting' function with a long-term planning role".⁴ Yet there was still little consensus over what any new strategy should entail. The Secretary's intervention prompted a prolonged and characteristically frenzied discussion, with each union official offering his own disparate point of view. Some wanted to block all closures until the Government agreed to coordinate another Beswick style tripartite review of BSC plans. Others, meanwhile, sought to sponsor an independent consultancy firm to produce an alternative development strategy. The industrial unions, however, waved aside both suggestions, upholding their traditional stance of

³ Minutes of special TUCSICC meeting, 30 June 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

⁴ Minutes of TUCSICC meeting, 10-12 July 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

not interfering in policymaking. Concerned by the lack of unanimity, Delay offered to produce a discussion paper exploring the viability of each proposal.

The document was eventually discussed at a special three-day summit in London in late July 1978. At a meagre six pages, the disconcertingly titled 'A Policy for Closures' weighed-up the practicalities of five possible policy initiatives:

- resist all closures by any means necessary (except where local workforces opted for a redundancy agreement);
- postpone closures by deliberately prolonging official discussions at national level; thus preserving all existing jobs for the maximum possible length of time;
- debating "in the very greatest detail" each individual closure with industry officials;
- demanding another tripartite investigation comparable to the original Beswick Review;
- and/or hiring an independent consultant to review both BSC's proposals for rationalisation and development.⁵

The discussion surrounding 'A Policy for Closures' reveals ongoing institutional discord. Demands for another state-sanctioned investigation were dismissed due to concerns that there was no such political will in Whitehall. Identifying a lack of technological or financial expertise amongst the Steel Committee, one official repeated an earlier call for an independent review:

⁵ TUCSICC discussion document: A Policy for Closures, June 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

... there were people available who had greater depth of technical knowledge and so forth about steel than any member of the Committee could be expected to have, and it seemed only sensible for the Committee to be able to put questions to such people.⁶

Disturbed by the possibility of outside interference, his colleagues steadfastly rejected the proposal. Hector Smith, meanwhile, advocated the concentration of all resources on only those works that had any realistic prospect of securing a reprieve:

Mr Smith recalled that he had pressed the Committee repeatedly to seek an overall view and not concentrate practically exclusively on one or two works, like Shelton, which had taken up a vastly disproportionate amount of the Committee's time, at the expense of other works. In his view, the Committee must decide to secure the long-term future of those works which had a real chance of surviving. This would mean being man enough to accept the inevitability of certain closures and then saying this to the members concerned.⁷

Following three days of clashes, a six-tier strategy was finally put on the table:

- respond as early as possible to any closure proposal with relevant comments and further questions;
- schedule preliminary talks with senior industry officials;

⁶ Minutes of TUCSICC meeting, 10-12 July 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

⁷ *Ibid.*

- depending on the outcome of said meeting, either formulate a counterproposal to closure or prepare for redundancy negotiations at plant-level;
- present counter proposals to management;
- if no agreement could be reached, make a formal approach to the Government;
- once all available options had been exhausted, negotiate closure.⁸

With little further discussion, the TUCSICC agreed to implement the above plan. There would, after all, be no dramatic rethink to the 'wait and see' policy, with the new strategy representing a compromise between rival organisations that possessed conflicting views on how to respond to the Road to Viability.

As the first non-Beswick site on management's updated closure list, Bilston was a strategic piece on a symbolic chess board containing every works outside the Big Five and South Yorkshire. It should have represented a point of departure, but union leaders were unable to set aside historic rivalries for the sake of their Black Country members. Sirs had been a keen advocate of the Steel Committee following his appointment as Chairman, passionately defending its record to a frustrated rank and file:

Arising from the decision to call a Special Executive Council Meeting to discuss in depth the role of TUCSICC and to give further consideration to the correspondence received from branches and the resolution submitted from the National Staff Negotiating Committee, a full discussion ensued on this matter. Criticism was expressed at the extension of this Committee's authority from the

⁸ TUCSICC discussion document: A Policy for Closures, June 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

original concept of a consultative body, lack of consultation with the lay membership and lack of communication and unnecessary delay in dealing with proposed changes in existing national agreements. A view was expressed that the Confederation, as the major union in the steel industry, could on its own, adequately represent the membership ... The General Secretary, replying to the points made, re-emphasised the many advantageous agreements reached between the BSC/TUCSICC which he pointed out had in the first place been approved by the respective Executive Councils of the trade unions concerned ... He asked for a vote of confidence in the continuation of the Confederation's participation ...⁹

More recently, he had blocked a delegate motion at Scarborough lambasting the Steel Committee's failure to protect the Beswick plants. However, notwithstanding his ongoing support for the umbrella body, Sirs developed a particularly uneasy relationship with fellow union officials and the post-Scarborough stand-off was dominated by a legal dispute with NUB leader Billy Booth. Spurning the opportunity to set aside their differences, infighting led to the maintenance of a status quo that had proven entirely ineffective in the past.

Remodelling the Defence Campaign

As their leaders procrastinated in London, Bilston's senior shop stewards looked to seize the momentum generated at Scarborough by drastically revising their survival blueprint. After closely examining the Road to Viability, they identified a possible

⁹ Minutes of special ISTC EC meeting, 22 March 1976, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/9.

opportunity. Paragraph 23 of the White Paper stated that decisionmakers would concentrate all future capital investment on, “reliable new technology to improve product quality and customer service”.¹⁰ The enterprising BJUAC leadership, therefore, began to investigate alternative production routes, eventually turning their attentions to a revolutionary experimental process discovered across the Atlantic.

Known as Q-BOP, it could theoretically be added to Bilston’s existing melting shop facility, slashing smelting times and, thereby, production costs. If installed, the entire heavy-end – including the abandoned Blast Furnace Department – could be saved. Moreover, as a recent innovation, Q-BOP fitted into policymakers’ new technology mantra. The process was originally brought to the BJUAC’s attention by economist Dr. Jonathan Aylen:

The case of Bilston is less clear cut as they have a relatively modern, high performance blast furnace. The best option here is not, perhaps, installation of electric arc furnaces to replace their obsolete open-hearth steelmaking, but adoption of a recent variant of basic oxygen steelmaking technology using a bottom blown vessel [Q-BOP]. These new steelmaking vessels could be fed with hot iron from the existing blast furnace. Providing the new vessels could be fitted into the existing open-hearth melting shop, this would offer a relatively cheap way of installing new technology in an old plant. Its adoption in a small-scale commercial plant would give the British Steel Corporation experience of

¹⁰ BSC, *The Road to Viability*. HMSO Cmnd. 7149, March 1978.

a developing technology which, so far, they only been able to test in a pilot plant, yet may be adopted in the largest scale plants in the future.¹¹

Having read the University of Salford academic's proposal, which was printed in a letter to *The Times*, the BJUAC undertook a fact-finding mission of their own. In July 1978, the group's youngest member, Graham Howe, wrote to USW officials in Pennsylvania who, in an act of international solidarity, put the Bilston men in touch with a pioneering engineer and fraternal brother at USS MaxTech. After completing a remote technological survey, Alan Hutnik confirmed Bilston's existing set-up could indeed be adapted to accommodate the new process. According to the American, his company had recently been commissioned to trial similar technology at an obsolete Italian works.¹² Seeking to incorporate the process into a new defence plan, the BJUAC liaised with both Aylen and engineers at David Ashmore International, the owners of Q-BOP's UK patent. The former agreed to produce a report exploring the practicality and implications of installing the process in the Black Country. The persuasive 16-page paper reasoned there was no technical reason for management to object to the concept:

Given its competitive costs, its low output and relatively modern billet mill, the Bilston works is suited to producing a wide range of sizes and orders for carbon steels in support of another BOS plant elsewhere taking the standard sizes and small orders. But, above all, installation of a bottom blown oxygen steelmaking unit at Bilston would provide the BSC with an opportunity to

¹¹ *The Times*, 17 May 1978.

¹² Letter from A. Hutnik to G. Howe, 13 July 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/4.

appraise, develop and operate a commercial pilot plant for a new steelmaking technology applicable to a wide range of steels including stainless.¹³

Regarding production costs, it was estimated that Q-BOP would reduce per unit costs to those currently being recorded at newer facilities:

... it does seem likely that the Bilston unit would have a conversion cost either the same or slightly higher than those of BOS plants elsewhere. The steelmaking costs at Bilston are likely to be between one-third and one-half of the conversion costs for the electric arcs currently used for making carbon steels. Considering too the overall costs of steelmaking including raw materials, the Bilston works as a whole would show lower overall steelmaking costs than electric arc plants if scrap prices were to rise. Given its low iron making costs, the bottom blow oxygen route at Bilston would show an overall cost very similar to that enjoyed by established blast furnace/BOS plants elsewhere.¹⁴

These findings convinced the men to remodel their entire campaign around Q-BOP. However, whilst Aylen's study covered industrial arguments, the BJUAC still needed to establish that there was a future market for Bilston steel. With John Pennington disingenuously dismissing their earlier customer survey, they sought independent verification from an impartial source. Dennis Turner persuaded fellow WMCC and WMBC officials to sponsor an independent study and, following a hasty procurement

¹³ J. Aylen, Bottom Blown Oxygen Steelmaking at Bilston, August 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/8, pp. 16-17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

process, a five-figure contract was awarded to Aston University's JURUE department, headed by Dr. Paul Johnson.

The decision to recruit a team of sympathetic – yet completely impartial – academics to help prepare an updated survival plan brought a new level of prestige to the campaign. JURUE, assisted by Aylen, the BJUAC and middle-management, produced an interim document challenging management prerogative. The report called for an independent examination of John Pennington's market share argument:

First, the market share loss figure is regarded by both Bilston and BSC as an important item in the closure balance sheet yet widely divergent views are held as to its likely size (Pennington – “any loss of tonnage would be marginal if properly managed”) – it is therefore important to seek an independent viewpoint on this matter; second, a proper examination of this issue should enable a good estimate to be made of future demand prospects in the event of Bilston not closing down, and hence provide a counterpart to technological/costing factors in the full investment appraisal that should be carried out before a final decision is reached regarding the future of the Works.¹⁵

Concluding that there was absolutely no *prima facie* case to shut Bilston, the report called for a delay on all discussions over the future until its authors had delivered a final report in March 1979. Meanwhile, the BJUAC informed the unions, management

¹⁵ JURUE, *A Proposal for an Independent Appraisal of the Situation*, July 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/8, pp. 7-8.

and the Government that the local authorities had commissioned JURUE to undertake a full cost benefit analysis of each of the options available; including closure, the JWP's electric arc plan and the BJUAC's new Q-BOP proposal.

Armed with their revised strategy, the Bilston men looked to publicly refute management's established closure narrative. Scarborough had previously thrust their plight into the national spotlight, providing them with an unprecedented opportunity to conduct their own public relations exercise. Local shop stewards had thereby looked to stimulate a wider debate about the future of public sector steel. Speaking to *The Guardian*, one shop steward extolled the virtues of the works:

We make the biggest 'rounds (steel bars) in the country. They were once the biggest in Europe. The biggest in the world even. We can still make quality steel better than anyone else and we can make it at a profit.¹⁶

In an interview with *The Observer*, Turner looked to deconstruct management's overcapacity/overmanning argument:

We could get an order for a five ton ingot and turn it out overnight. But that's just about four ounces of dolly mixtures in BSC terms ... Capacity isn't the only argument. It's where that capacity is that also counts – and it's here in the West Midlands – the workshop of the world. We serve the small men, the small

¹⁶ *The Guardian*, 1 July 1978.

forging plants. We take in each other's washing. If we go, that work will fall into the hands of the private sector.¹⁷

Turner, the public face of the campaign, undoubtedly basked in the media spotlight, even persuading the producers of the BBC's Panorama programme to investigate the treatment of the works. But, with the furore over Scarborough now having settled, the BJUAC feared they had lost the opportunity to promote their updated plan at national level. Armed with a new press release, 'The Bilston Dimension' or 'Our Answer to BSC', action committee supporters participated in what was later dubbed 'The Fleet Street Occupation'. Organising wildcat sit-down protests in the reception areas of major news outlets in London, the Bilston men targeted influential industrial correspondents with their sophisticated document:

And I said to my colleagues, really we've got to do more to get our message across, we've got this case, it's a wonderful case ... So we set out, 250 of us, in about five charabancs, you know, five coaches, from here to Fleet Street ... and we took over, just briefly, every one of the offices of the newspapers, and we just went in and just filled the foyer with workers ... I mean, you imagine 250 people, you know, in a reception area, it's very powerful stuff.¹⁸

Persuasively written, the paper began with a message to the press:

¹⁷ *The Observer*, 2 July 1978.

¹⁸ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, p. 18.

During these past few weeks, much attention has been focused on the British Steel industry with obvious justification. My Colleagues and I are persuaded to write to you since a great amount of your Newspaper Coverage was in fact surrounding the Bilston Steel Plant, here in the West Midlands, concerning the principled stand taken by the ISTC regarding the unprincipled way BSC proposed dealing with the Bilston current/future situation.¹⁹

The authors also drew readers' attention to the reasons for Bilston's superior financial performance and commercial viability:

The greatest significance of these figures [Bilston's profitability] with which we hope you would agree is that in extremes of Market Demand profitability can be sustained by the speed and flexibility of the small, integrated plant, where adjustment and adaptation can be more practically and manageably applied.²⁰

The Bilston Dimension subsequently highlighted the market share argument:

There have been many reasons for this and a significant one is, that almost all plant closures have led to some loss of orders. If Bilston Works is closed down this would undoubtedly happen again. The amount of market share BSC would lose in such circumstances is open to debate but the Commercial personnel closest to customers [*sic*] Buyers are convinced that it would be a significant percentage of Bilston's current order load. We feel that BSC cannot

¹⁹ BJUAC, *The Bilston Dimension*, undated, ITSOE, BCA1/3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

afford to continue to take actions which erode it's [sic] market share any further. The Working Party report on Bilston, very clearly demonstrated that relatively modest investment at Bilston with one Electric Arc furnace or Q BOP would enable the market share to be maintained at a very healthy profit to the Corporation. Losing this would add to the profitability of private sector producers, not only in this country but also abroad – can we afford yet further increases in steel imports?²¹

It also readdressed the overcapacity issue, informing the press of the immorality of management's policy of requisitioning their hard-earned orders:

The overcapacity developed elsewhere is through no fault of Bilston and is relevant to the past outlook in respect to those other works and their projected order loads. In pressing for the continuance of Bilston, we are not asking that orders be taken from other works, we are only saying that we should have the right to retain orders we have traditionally had and be allowed to continue to increase them.²²

Believing there was a general election on the horizon, the BJUAC shrewdly appealed to the British taxpayer. Using data presented by JURUE's interim study, they contended that shutting their works would cost the Treasury a staggering £54.1m.²³

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ It was calculated closure would reduce the Corporation's losses by less than 0.5 per cent. See *Ibid.*

The Bilston Dimension concluded with a heartfelt plea, describing the human impact of closure and, moreover, the immorality of state sanctioned unemployment:

We must of course, always be wary of purely financial considerations, in the full analysis a profit is only 'positive' in this human world if it is used to improve human satisfaction. If that profit has been created by increasing human misery through redundancies and closures then the final result in terms of human satisfaction will undoubtedly be a negation of all that our society regards as purposeful and civilised progress.²⁴

The effect of the media campaign was clear, with the BJUAC – and Turner in particular – cultivating a much closer relationship with some of Fleet Street's more sympathetic journalists. *The Financial Times*, *The Observer* and *The Irish Times* each ran favourable stories on the fight for steelmaking, whilst also scrutinising the behaviour of management. *The Guardian's* Peter Hildrew eventually made a personal visit to Bilston, prompting an article that highlighted the hopes and fears of the local community. The piece also outlined the benefits of significant capital investment, whilst underscoring the ongoing popularity of Bilston steel.²⁵ Hildrew, whose feature included Turner's favourite William Morris quote, clearly admired the charismatic steelman, describing him as an "impressive figure".²⁶ Two other journalists who developed a close friendship with the BJUAC Chairman were Paul Routledge and

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *The Guardian*, 6 December 1978.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Geoffrey Goodman, with the latter crediting him for convincing his Fleet Street team of the moral justice of his crusade.²⁷

The media exposure briefly captured the public's imagination, with the action committee receiving messages of support from across the UK. Beyond the public sphere, the new survival plan also earned the backing of industry experts, with the editor of *The Engineer* publishing a favourable multi-page spread on the potential of Q-BOP steelmaking in the Black Country.²⁸ Nonetheless, if Bilston's steelmen were to triumph, they still needed assistance from Congress House. Richard Hyman, in his *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Approach*, has identified the importance of securing the support of national trade union elites:

In a major dispute, success may depend on support from outside the plant in terms of financial aid, respect for picket lines, or blacking. (External aid is particularly crucial in conflicts over large-scale redundancy or closure, when the workplace organisation alone is in an unusually weak position). Effective mobilisation of outside support normally requires some organisation through unofficial channels; but it is easier to achieve when a stoppage has official union support.²⁹

²⁷ Letter from G. Goodman to D. Turner, 1 May 1979, WCA, DW-173/1/10.

²⁸ *The Engineer*, 28 September 1978.

²⁹ Hyman, *Industrial Relations*, p. 168.

Within the trade union movement, the plan received the backing of Robert Muir, leader of SIMA. His most senior Bilston member, Frank Chaney, reiterated middle-management's support for the new proposal in a statement to the press:

We are completely in sympathy with the action committee's right to stop British Steel closing the works. We have our livelihood [*sic*] to think of and we have a common cause with the shop floor workers. We must make a stand together.³⁰

At an extra-ordinary branch meeting, Bilston's approximately 75 SIMA members thereby passed a controversial resolution attacking policymakers:

We ask National Council and the General Secretary to endeavour to make BSC justify this policy and hope that all relevant parties will bear in mind that whilst high management 'flounder' to their decisions, plants like Bilston Works are being inhibited for giving a good quality and flexible, repeat flexible, service to many 'small order' customers and at the same time are putting the livelihood of many of the corporations [*sic*] employees at risk.³¹

Muir himself backed his Bilston members' stance with an open letter to Sir Charles Villiers. Threatening to call his entire membership out on strike, he launched into an unprecedented attack on Grosvenor Place, "It is not the habit of managers to indulge in any kind of public criticism of BSC unless and until its loyalty and credibility has given

³⁰ *The Express and Star*, 5 July 1978.

³¹ Letter from F. Chaney to R. Muir, 21 July 1978, MRC, 755/4/4/5.

way to a judgement that the high command was no longer in control”.³² At a subsequent conference in Watford, his National Executive pledged to resist closure at all costs. Although a formal endorsement from SIMA was a positive step, the middle-management union was blacklisted by the TUC. The new survival blueprint still required the formal backing of the Steel Committee. This, the Bilston men discovered, would prove a much more difficult task than first envisioned.

The Delay Paper

Notwithstanding the failure of the TUCSICC to establish a new national defence strategy, Bill Sirs and the ISTC were much more active in the wake of Scarborough. In August 1978, a delegation from Swinton House at last visited the Black Country. Impressed by the work of Aylen and JURUE, they agreed to throw their full weight behind Q-BOP.

At an ensuing press conference, Sirs told journalists that he saw the battle for Bilston as a trial of strength, warning management to “tread carefully”.³³ A day later, addressing his union’s reconvened ADC, he defiantly proclaimed the plant represented a “dividing line”; promising his efforts on behalf of Bilston would, “set the pattern for all future action”.³⁴ In a break in procedure, he ended his speech by calling on BSC to modify its approach to development by investing in mini-works. Then, in a pledge that brought a sense of relief to the BJUAC leaders, the industry’s most

³² *The Birmingham Post*, 5 July 1978.

³³ *The Financial Times*, 23 August 1978.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

powerful General Secretary promised to force Grosvenor Place and Whitehall into abandoning their step-by-step approach to rationalisation.

The BJUAC would benefit from the personal backing of some of the Confederation's most senior officials. Bill Irvine, head of the union's Scottish chapter, offered the full "support and solidarity" of his members, advising the Bilston men to maintain open communications with Swinton House:

Another danger is not to tell your EC members in the division what is going on, the communication in Scotland in this respect were poor, and we were unable to push the case for non-closure of Glengarnock at EC level, because, as EC members we were left in the dark as to the genuine wishes of the workforce. Please do not allow this to happen in No.4 division, so that your E.C. members can give you the assistance you seriously require and deserve.³⁵

Reflecting on closures in Scotland, Irvine provided a cautionary tale:

In Scotland we have recently gone through the traumatic experience of the closure (partial) of Glengarnock Works, an event, given the initial attitude and determination of the workforce, that I thought could never happen. But happen it did, due solely to the severance pay incentives offered by the BSC. Indeed, at some point last week, it looked like even the 250 jobs to remain the remaining mill, would not be manned, so great was the rush to get out of the industry. If

³⁵ Letter from B. Irvine to G. Fazey, 21 December 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/2.

you can persuade your members that this is not the answer and that they are selling jobs, which are not theirs to sell, then you will have success.³⁶

There was, nevertheless, still the small matter of convincing the remaining steel unions of the merits of Q-BOP. Acting on Sirs' advice, the BJUAC decided to lobby a special Steel Committee meeting at Congress in September 1978. One of the most memorable events of the entire conference was a speech made by Round Oak steelworker and BJUAC supporter Jack Bates:

No one can put a price on the human misery, the deprivation, the break-up of family and community life which the closure will create. Since 1973, Bilston has made a profit every year of between £3 million and £7 million. Last October, the BSC put the Blast Furnace into 'Mothballs' after spending ¾ million £'s on reline. This action effectively wiped out Bilston's profits in order to temporarily improve the Corporation's cash flow position. Now BSC argue that Bilston is unprofitable and must be closed. These are the economics of a madhouse ... Mr President, on behalf of Bilston's steel workers – their families – their future – their community I would request that the Steel Committee in their future discussions on Bilston with the British Steel Corporation and Secretary of State for Industry press for the retention of steelmaking at Bilston ... If an impartial inquiry [the JURUE report] finds that Bilston is a viable concern and the BSC continue to insist on closure for short-term financial considerations, then the steel workers of Bilston – indeed the steel workers throughout Britain – will expect the Steel Committee to use all its powers to force the BSC to keep

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Bilston in operation, otherwise there will be no steel industry left to talk about at future congresses.³⁷

For the remainder of the conference, a Bilston deputation that included a group of female office workers dubbed 'The Brighton Belles', stalked TUCSICC officials as they made their way around the Brighton Centre. On the final day, when arriving for an extraordinary meeting, steel union leaders were greeted by a boisterous welcome committee.

Permitted to enter, a small delegation presented the Q-BOP proposal, with BJUAC leaders specifically targeting NUB officials Hector Smith and Billy Booth. Before departing, the Bilston men handed over a written list of demands, the most significant of which called for the, "full support of the TUC Steel Committee the retention of the Bilston plant".³⁸ Left to their own devices, the TUCSICC discussed the relative merits of Q-BOP. One official raised doubts over its practicality, highlighting the failure of similar processes at private sector facilities elsewhere. Another voiced specific concerns over the expertise of the BJUAC's academic allies. The unpredictable Smith, who had previously revealed a willingness to sacrifice Bilston as a means of protecting members employed at the Big Five, nevertheless, softened his position. Clearly impressed by the action committee presentation and JURUE's interim report, he now called on his fellow General Secretaries to defend the works:

³⁷ J. Bate, Speech to TUC Congress, undated, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

³⁸ Questions to be submitted to the TUCSICC, 7 September 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/4.

Mr Smith said that the Committee had to decide very firmly whether they were prepared to make a stand on Bilston which, in principle, he believed should be kept open, unless either BSC made out a case that was in fact unanswerable and provided the pressures on the workers did not become intolerable.³⁹

With the production unions on board, the remaining Steel Committee officials were left with no option but to withdraw their earlier opposition. Following the meeting, a spokesperson emphasised the strategic importance of retaining Bilston, "What happens thereafter in the industry depends on what happens at Bilston ... the future of the industry is at stake".⁴⁰

In accordance with Congress House's post-Scarborough strategy, Sirs asked Dennis Delay to produce a detailed working paper to discuss with BSC officials via the JPC. Over the coming weeks, the relationship between Congress House and the Bilston men reached its zenith, with Delay making regular trips to the West Midlands to discuss a dual strategy. The men also benefitted from the assistance of Hector Smith and the NUB. The action committee were becoming concerned by the effect the GWW was having on the mindset of the plant's blast furnacemen. Following David Hunter's transfer, a significant number of his former workmen had resigned. The loss of these skilled and experienced workers was a major blow, particularly with hot metal production now being a vital component of the Q-BOP plan. When concerns were

³⁹ Minutes of TUCSICC meeting, 7 September 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13. Unlike the JWP's electric arc proposal, the new Q-BOP scheme called for the relighting of Elisabeth and, therefore, the retention of the plant's 120 NUB members.

⁴⁰ *The Guardian*, 8 September 1978.

raised by his Bilston members, Smith renegotiated a wage deal whereby they would be paid 100 per cent standard earnings for the remainder of the plant's lifespan.

The steel union leaders also began to advocate the Bilston case nationally. At the October 1978 Labour Party conference, they submitted a composite motion calling on the NEC and PLP to back a proposed moratorium on all planned closures.⁴¹ Alluding to the Elisabeth decision, the resolution demanded the Government veto any decisions directly resulting from mismanagement. Union officials also forced through an emergency debate on the industry. In what proved to be an extremely controversial speech, the ISTC's Assistant General Secretary took aim at the Government for reneging on their 1973 manifesto pledge. Current policy, he charged, would lead to the creation of steel ghost towns.⁴²

Away from the conference hall, the TUCSICC Secretary busied himself preparing the so-called 'Delay Paper'; a report that, by combining the findings and recommendations of the JWP, JURUE and Bilston Dimension documents, established the best possible case for retention. Expanding on previous commercial arguments, it revealed additional empirical evidence that established how the plant's close personal relations with UK steel users had resulted from decades of excellent customer service.⁴³ This included the results of a detailed Aston University-sponsored survey demonstrating how BSC would lose a significant proportion of its Black Country orders with the closure of Bilston. Underscoring this independently verified claim were personal

⁴¹ The overambitious resolution also demanded back pay for all out of work former BSC employees released after the Road to Viability.

⁴² *Man and Metal*, December 1978.

⁴³ TUCSICC, *The Delay Paper*, September 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/4.

testimonies from local steel users raising concerns over the quality of steel sourced elsewhere. The Delay Paper went onto criticise Mount officials for the manner in which they had mismanaged the special steels sector over the past decade. Contrasting Sheffield Division's financial record to that of Bilston's, it drew attention to the discriminatory commercial policies implemented since reorganisation.

The document continued by scrutinising management's established overcapacity argument. Casting doubts on Grosvenor Place's ability to accurately forecast future demand, it established how the issue was far less pronounced in the world carbon steels market. Delay also charged that any improvement in capacity utilisation resulting from Bilston's closure would be negligible, due to the limited productive capability of the facility. The paper concluded by demanding no local action should be taken by management until JURUE had delivered its forthcoming study into the feasibility of new steelmaking equipment.

The Corporation Strikes Back

Following their humbling at Scarborough, senior industry officials initially adopted a soft-pedal approach towards Bilston; instead focusing their energies on securing the closure of Glengarnock, the final Beswick plant in Scotland. However, BSC soon returned to the Black Country. In September 1978, with weekly losses hitting an astonishing £15m, Sir Charles Villiers bemoaned the financial impact the enforced retention of the likes of Bilston was having on public coffers.⁴⁴ After informing the national press that the works had already recorded a £1.3m deficit in the current

⁴⁴ Projected losses for that year were set at an eye watering £680m.

financial year, he revealed that he would do everything in his power to eliminate such losses. The Grosvenor Place press machine also leaked figures claiming the annual cost of keeping older, redundant facilities in operation equated to roughly £10,000 per employee.⁴⁵ Then, seeking to undermine the BJUAC's recently-revealed Q-BOP plan, he told the BBC's 'This Week' programme that both his organisation and the Government saw no future for the facility in any capacity whatsoever.⁴⁶ The interview elicited an angry riposte from the unions:

Nationwide publicity has been given to the closure situation by the BSC which now hangs like the sword of Damocles over the heads of the Bilston workforce. Despite the action taken following the National Delegate Conference, the BSC Chairman made it quite clear in a TV broadcast ... that Bilston was still a target area for closures, irrespective of the working parties alternative proposals and the social consequences, closure would mean for the area. This is a declaration of intent before either case has been heard by the Steel Committee, and must in fact, generate a thought as to the state of industrial relations which now exists between the workforce and the BSC. It is a bitter pill to swallow when the Chairman of a nationalised industry can categorically state, regardless of social consequences, closures must proceed and quickly, and then go on to say that if the present strategy is unsuccessful by 1980 he would not be in the driving seat anyway, as his contract would ended. Life, however, has to go on in the communities and the disruption created in the lifestyle of our

⁴⁵ At the same time, Grosvenor Place refused to address press rumours that they were seeking to sack 140,000 workers. See *The Sunday Telegraph*, 24 September 1978.

⁴⁶ Concerned by negative press, Villiers also blocked the BBC's Panorama team from filming at Bilston, thereby prompting producers to cancel the show at the eleventh hour.

membership cannot be assessed in the cash compensation terms. The sugar coat on the cyanide pill makes little difference to the ultimate result.⁴⁷

Away from the cameras, during a chance meeting at a Divisional conference on joint consultation, an impudent Villiers looked to coerce his Bilston employees into surrendering their livelihoods. The astonishing exchange was reported to the Works Council by action committee leader John Booth:

I shall remember his words for many years. He told us we were a beautiful workforce – a marvellous set of chaps – but we should go back to our members and cushion the blow. We should negotiate, start a new life, get new jobs, and invest our money in little cottages in the country.⁴⁸

This particular episode reveals how, even after Scarborough, senior BSC officials were still looking to bypass formal consultation arrangements. Meanwhile, back in Bilston, divisional management undermined performance even further. As lower grade pig iron poured into the melting shop, local shop stewards discovered that 10,000 tonnes of cold plate originally produced by 'Big Lizzie' was sitting idly in a South Yorkshire stockyard. John Pennington, who refused to release the material, was accused of malice by an incandescent Dennis Turner:

This, I think, you would agree, contrasts strongly with the BSC Sheffield Agreement for 'Moth-balling' the Blast Furnace, which was that the BSC could

⁴⁷ Minutes of ISTC EC meeting, 16-18 August 1978, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

⁴⁸ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 31 August 1978.

not find any outlet for our surplus iron-make during the recession. It further, clearly demonstrates that there can no longer be any legitimate reason for BSC refusing to re-light the Bilston Blast Furnace immediately, unless of course their motivation is, and has been, throughout, to cost [sic] Bilston in the worst possible light to achieve their spiteful objective.⁴⁹

Bilston's steelmen were also forced to depend on low-grade oil which, alongside the imported cold metal, heavily reduced the operational lifespan of each OH furnace. There was also a renewed attack on earnings. Craft workers, including the BJUAC's Frank Robinson, were threatened with the GWW. Promotions were banned, with senior production workers handed additional duties without remuneration. Management also refused to admit any new apprentices, leading to the partial closure of Bilston's prized training centre.⁵⁰

Having prepared the ground for a renewed assault, Grosvenor Place opened talks with the TUCSICC via the much maligned JPC. The first meeting ended on a surprisingly positive note, with senior industry officials agreeing to discuss the Q-BOP plan with Aylen in person. The November 1978 talks, however, proved to be a particularly tense affair, with disinterested management deliberately adopting a contumacious manner.⁵¹ By erroneously claiming that his organisation already possessed a full working knowledge of the "well-established" process, one senior BSC official dismissed the

⁴⁹ Letter from D. Turner to unknown, 3 November 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/4.

⁵⁰ The works also continued to suffer from BSC's discriminatory personnel policy, as the last cohort of trainees were cherry-picked by Sheffield Division. Janet Sadler, a Bilston girl who had recently received a BA in metallurgy, was head-hunted by Rotherham works.

⁵¹ In a letter to Dennis Turner summarising the meeting, Aylen described John Pennington as an "awkward adversary". See Letter from J. Aylen to D. Turner, 19 November 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/8.

need to pilot the technology in the Black Country.⁵² A composed Aylen, nonetheless, contended that his counterparts had little more than a basic theoretical knowledge of the method, highlighting the practicality of developing a broader operating experience at a fully-integrated OH works. Ignoring Aylen's standpoint, management bemoaned overall cost projections, which were estimated to be a staggering £17.2m. The BJUAC's ally, however, later balked at this figure:

As I suggested on the phone, the real dispute between us is mainly with regard to the economics of the scheme. I suspect their scheme is unduly lavish knowing the BSC. They were very cagey indeed about revealing any details of their proposals. As a next step, I think we ought to insist that they reveal more of their scheme and we ought to consider very seriously whether it is worth calling in an outside consultant to compile an alternative scheme.⁵³

It came as little surprise when, only days later, the two sides of the JPC failed to come to a consensus over Q-BOP. The experiment was yet another example of managerial subterfuge: like the earlier JWP exercise, a red herring devised to give the impression of full and meaningful consultation. As was the case with double-end firing and electric arc steelmaking, however, BSC only ever gave a cursory glance at their employees' counterproposals, having absolutely no intention of altering the basis of their development strategy. With talks in London stalling, the action committee and their supporters became incredibly frustrated. A flyer produced with the express permission of local shop stewards revealed a clear dissatisfaction with the JPC, describing it as

⁵² Meeting to discuss Q-BOP steelmaking at Bilston, 8 November 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/8.

⁵³ Letter from J. Aylen to D. Turner, 19 November 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/8.

a, “tool of BSC to push through more plant closures, to weaken still further Trade Union and shop-floor organisation and demoralise resistance to bosses [*sic*] plans”.⁵⁴

These frustrations came to a head during the ‘Day of Action’, an event the BJUAC organised alongside the WB&DTUC.⁵⁵ The mass rally attracted 3,500 protestors and was an altogether different affair to previous events such as the March on London or the Fleet Street Occupation. Some attendees antagonised police officers, as radical left-wing groups handed-out flyers encouraging workers to engage in violent direct action. The SCLV, for example, called on protestors to strike in support of Bilston:

These vital elements of workers control will not be conceded lightly. They can only be won by mass direct action, by the solidarity action of other local workers like that offered by the Wolverhampton FBU and by engineering workers ... but only if it is combined with strike action by other shop stewards in support of an occupation of the Bilston plant.⁵⁶

In doing so, they encouraged the formation of “worker defence squads” to prevent attacks from state agents:

Politically as long as the bosses have at their disposal the police and the army, the special strike busting squads like the SPG and the SAS every militant

⁵⁴ SCLV pamphlet, 11 September 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/3, p. 1.

⁵⁵ The organising committee also included representatives from the FBU, the AUEW, the SCLV, the SWP, the CPGB and the IWP. Wolverhampton’s firemen were known for their militancy and had recently participated in prolonged strike action.

⁵⁶ SCLV pamphlet, 11 September 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/3, p. 1.

struggle will be at risk. Pickets must be developed into workers defence squads capable of resisting the vicious attacks of the police – of the kind seen at Grunwick last year.⁵⁷

The event featured a symbolic strike and culminated with a speech from Turner placing Bilston in the context of the wider de-industrialisation of the UK:

I believe we are going to win the battle for Bilston and at the same time win a battle for every one of us. If BSC breaks the spirit of the Bilston men, thousands of jobs will go as though they never existed.⁵⁸

In the post-steel period, the Day of Action would have a major impact on Turner's future career as a political activist and Parliamentarian, but for now it provided little more than a temporary respite for beleaguered steelworkers. Days later, the BJUAC received word from Congress House. With the JPC experiment having failed, Grosvenor Place had placed the short-term future of Bilston on the agenda of their December 1978 meeting with the TUCSICC. The final countdown to closure had begun.

Conclusion

With management forced into a temporary withdrawal following their humbling at Scarborough, TUCSICC officials were handed what would prove to be one final

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *The Express and Star*, 12 September 1978.

opportunity to coordinate a collective, inter-organisational national defence strategy on behalf of surviving older works. As the first non-Beswick site on the Corporation's growing closure list, Bilston should have taken on a symbolic status for the unions, representing a dividing line between past cooperation and future resistance. Institutional disharmony, however, kept the Steel Committee in a state of fragmented impotence. With little consensus over what any revamped strategy should entail, they merely maintained a firefighting approach that had proven itself to be wholly ineffective in the past.

With their leaders in London vacillating, local steelmen once again sought to seize the initiative for themselves. Having remodelled their entire campaign on a revolutionary steelmaking technique, they enlisted a team of prestigious academics and industry experts to prepare yet another survival blueprint. Armed with new, impartial evidence, the Bilston men participated in direct action, occupying Fleet Street in an efficacious attempt to forge a closer relationship with sympathetic industrial correspondents. This sophisticated manipulation of the press provided the action committee with a national stage from which they publicly exposed the intellectual weaknesses of management's established overcapacity/overmanning narrative.

Despite receiving the backing of a variety of key actors, including the Executives of SIMA, the ISTC and other industry insiders, the BJUAC struggled to secure the formal endorsement of the remaining TUCSICC affiliated unions. In what was a frustrating and time-consuming process, the expert lobbyists were forced to petition leaders at Brighton, eventually receiving the support of Congress House. Over the coming weeks, the relationship between Steel Committee leaders and the action committee

reached a high-water mark, with their Executives advocating the Bilston case a national level.

Armed with the Delay Paper, the TUCSICC opened talks with management via the JPC. The Corporation, nonetheless, were determined to undermine the campaign, continuing to rundown the plant whilst directing another entirely pointless consultation experiment. Like the JWP, the JPC was devised to give the impression of full and meaningful consultation in order to placate the TUCSICC and the Government. This cynical act of subterfuge worked, with Whitehall and the unions too easily acceding to Grosvenor Place's incomprehensible dismissal of the Q-BOP plan.

Rank and file steelworkers' growing frustrations with the JPC exercise, management behaviour, their Government and the impotence of union leaders spilled over at the Day of Action, a protest that was marred by threats of violence towards state agents. Indeed, the next chapter investigates what proved to be a turbulent final phase in the battle for iron and steelmaking, with the plant's traditionally moderate shop stewards forced into undertaking militant industrial action.

Chapter 7: Hot Words, Cold Actions

This chapter provides a comprehensive account of the final stage of the battle for iron and steelmaking. It begins by chronicling Grosvenor Place's response to continued shop-floor resistance following the rejection of the men's most recent counterproposal. Having failed to secure a negotiated closure by conventional means, management sought to destroy local solidarity by using the prospect of a golden handshake to divide Bilston's beleaguered workforce into two warring camps.

The nature and success of this insidious plot is examined. As are the strategies employed by an increasingly desperate BJUAC leadership team seeking to thwart these illicit overtures. It is revealed how, by reluctantly undertaking radical militant action, this customarily moderate breed of shop steward secured a temporary stay of execution. With the TUCSICC withdrawing its support following the failure of Q-BOP, the BJUAC turned to Bill Sirs who, after a frustrating period of indolence, belatedly threw his hat in the ring. The suitability of his abortive Bilston defence strategy is critiqued, as is a Whitehall-backed management decision to reject the action committee's final counterproposal, the JURUE report. The chapter concludes by demonstrating how the BJUAC eventually lost authority amongst some sections of the shop-floor, prompting the campaign to disintegrate from within.

The Plant Takeover

Upon entering Grosvenor Place for the December 1978 showdown talks, the BJUAC and their union leaders were met by a BSC negotiating team in an uncompromising mood. Announcing a projected £151m half-year loss, Robert Scholey revealed the

BSC board had formally ratified the JPC's decision to reject Q-BOP steelmaking.¹ A querulous Chief Executive, bemoaning the fact that consultation had lasted for over a year, suggested the time had now come for the men to consider a negotiated closure. Black Bob strategically reminded his counterparts that a generous compensation package awaited any Bilston members willing to immediately relinquish their livelihoods.² Raising the stakes even further, he produced a prospective unilateral February 1979 order for the dampening down of two of the melting shop's three remaining OH furnaces. Referring to the September 1977 two-part, plantwide resolution, Dennis Turner responded by confirming the action committee didn't possess a mandate to negotiate closure on the workforce's behalf; though he agreed to take the advanced redundancy offer back to colleagues, as per established consultancy arrangements. Following an intervention from ISTC-affiliated TUCSICC officials, Scholey grudgingly agreed to adjourn national talks until he had received a copy of the final JURUE report.

Arriving back in the West Midlands, the BJUAC called on a mass meeting to, "fight for every last bit of slag".³ A defiant Turner convinced attendees to raise their hands in support of a plantwide resolution rejecting Scholey's offer, as well as his order to reduce steelmaking operations. Copies were immediately forwarded to Eric Varley, Grosvenor Place and Congress House.

¹ By the end of the financial year BSC had lost £309m. See BSC, *Annual Report and Accounts 1978/9* (London, 1979), p. 7.

² The BJUAC were also warned that they risked receiving a diminished redundancy package unless a deal was agreed in a timely fashion.

³ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 14 December 1978.

The Corporation, frustrated by the result of the mass meeting, responded by seeking to strong-arm vulnerable sections of the workforce into a surrender. Adopting a range of tactics, the primary objective was to undermine prevailing solidarity with talk of record-breaking redundancy cheques. The first indication of management engaging in what local shop stewards described as “skulduggery” came in the form of a written notice alerting workers to the financial windfall currently being enjoyed by Shelton workers.⁴ The Corporation’s finely tuned propaganda machine then clicked into another gear, using the plant’s internal newswire to spread the very same message. When angry workers unplugged telephone lines, management raised the stakes even further:

British Steel had got a recording [system] in the Training Centre ... They’d [management] set up a scrambling propaganda machine to tell workers all the time what they were likely to expect in the way of redundancy payment, encouraging them to throw the towel in, it was real Goebbels propaganda; it was, really. And it was churned out through the Tannoy system twenty-four hours a day, this propaganda. I knew that people felt very passionately about this, and how it was seeking to destroy our will, creating uncertainty and generally debilitating our campaign.⁵

These tactics signalled a new stage in BSC’s bid to secure an expedited closure, representing an altogether more insidious attempt to split the workforce. Graham Fazey, however, revealed this had the opposite impact:

⁴ Letter from P. Watts to W. Sirs, 15 December 1978, MRC, MSS.36/2000/282.

⁵ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, p. 14.

Also enclosed, herewith, a copy of the Telephone News Service Broadcast on the plant Friday last which we can only interpret as firstly to mislead the workforce on what actually did take place at the Steel Committee meeting with BSC on Wednesday, and secondly to offer a cheap bribe for our jobs, which presumably BSC thought that by throwing a few handfuls of corn, Bilston would come tumbling into their pigeon loft! If this was their hope you may inform them that this devious ploy has been extremely counter-productive and has totally consolidated the workforce's resolve to resolutely oppose closure.⁶

In fact, the final sentence of Fazey's dispatch masked widespread concerns over how the Corporation's sinister actions were indeed impacting the mindset of some of the men. Immediate and decisive action was required. Unable to obstruct the internal spread of information, Turner used the press to draw attention to the immorality of management's recent conduct. Speaking to *The Financial Times*, he complained about their "devious" behaviour, whilst sending a message of defiance to Grosvenor Place, "We are still in negotiation. If the Corporation thinks we will sell our souls for chicken feed, they have another thing coming".⁷

Predictably, Turner's protest fell on deaf ears. At a subsequent Works Council meeting it was revealed The Mount had ordered the reduction of steelmaking as per Scholey's December 1978 *communique*. John Booth responded by launching an unprecedented attack on Works Manager Stan Bull for doing Grosvenor Place's

⁶ Letter from G. Fazey to W. Sirs, undated, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

⁷ *The Financial Times*, 12 December 1978.

bidding.⁸ Bull, nevertheless, ordered the premature withdrawal of one OH furnace, claiming it had become unstable. However, when inspecting the melting shop for themselves, workers discovered the vessel was simply suffering from a minor technical issue. Ignoring fervent protests, management forged ahead with the order.

These cynical actions prompted the BJUAC to adopt a much more militant position than at any other point in the campaign. This began with Turner threatening to withhold a lucrative order destined for China.⁹ When BSC ignored the warning, senior shop stewards met to ascertain what radical action could be undertaken to maintain steelmaking operations until the arrival of JURUE report. It was agreed that, with the wider workforce's permission, they would repair and relight the furnace in question. Consent was sought via another mass meeting. At the gathering steelmen were greeted by the unusual sight of Turner donning a safety helmet and fire-proof overalls. After intentionally firing-up his audience with talk of "industrial sabotage", a show of hands gave the BJUAC a slight mandate to enter the melting shop. The BJUAC Chairman then led the huddled mass to Bilston town-centre, where market day shoppers cheered as he declared:

⁸ Booth's protest sparked a mass walkout, thereby bringing an end to the Bilston Works Council, an institution first established by S&L decades prior. Within days all plant-level joint consultation mechanisms were abandoned as the relationship between local management and Bilston's trade unionists broke down completely. See Minutes of Bilston Works Council meeting, 17 January 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/2.

⁹ The order was of considerable commercial and strategic value to BSC as it was part of a multi-million-pound contract negotiated with Chinese Communist Government. When making the threat, the BJUAC Chairman knew Bilston's mill operatives were the only steelmen in the UK capable of producing semi-finished steel products to that specification.

We are not going to be led like sheep to a pen. We will fight with every ounce of strength we have to maintain the works at full production. British Steel will not cheat us out of our right to work.¹⁰

Returning from the impromptu rally, Turner was met by Bull and two unfamiliar faces:

... but then the next thing was, straightaway there was a demand for me to attend the General Manager's office, which was right in the heart of the plant, near to where we were, and so I went and there were two factory inspectors that had come to tell me that we had no right to be there and we were breaching all of the Factory Acts in terms of health and safety, and whatever.¹¹

Much to their surprise, the enterprising steelworker had already arranged for insurance cover for his repair team. Management now played their final card, presenting Turner with a formal order:

A number of employees at Bilston are repairing or intending to repair this furnace and it should be understood quite clearly that this is contrary to the Corporation's instructions. Consequently, you are warned that any employee who is involved with the repair or later re-commissioning or any other activity on the furnace is acting in breach of his contract of employment and renders himself liable to immediate loss of pay and, if such involvement continues, to summary dismissal for gross misconduct without further warning. The effect of

¹⁰ *The Express and Star*, 31 January 1979.

¹¹ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, pp. 14-15.

such termination would be that amongst other things you would not be entitled to any benefits relating to redundancy or additional severance pay.¹²

BSC, however, had again underestimated the strength of the BJUAC's determination. There would be no climbdown. A repair team immediately went ahead and fixed the furnace. Meanwhile, in what was undoubtedly an incredibly cathartic act, some of the campaign's most ardent supporters forced their way into the Training Centre and dismantled the notorious PA system. With management's authority completely undermined, the action committee leadership exploited the situation even further. Over the next 24-hours they oversaw a partial plant takeover, shutting down internal communications.

Although an incredible amount of anger was generated by BSC's recent actions, these acts of disobedience were entirely conscience-stricken. Upon assuming control of production, shop stewards encouraged fellow workers to perform regular duties. Decades later, when quizzed about these remarkable events, Turner adopted a conspicuously apologetic tone, "So effectively it was a 24 hour curfew, worker takeover of the plant, but it wasn't done in a sense of hostility or a feeling of us [challenging] British Steel. It was purely in order to bring that furnace on".¹³

This extraordinary act of rebellion, nonetheless, achieved its immediate objective, with management seeking an interim compromise agreement. An uncharacteristically conciliatory Scholey formally agreed to maintain current production and manning

¹² Letter from BSC to Bilston employees, undated, MRC, MSS.365/BSC/56.

¹³ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, pp. 15-16.

levels until he had received the JURUE report. The plant takeover and work-in certainly captured the imagination of trade union leaders, with Jack Gavin proclaiming:

It would be remiss of me if I were not to mention probably one of the finest demonstrations of solidarity and defiance that the Steel Industry had seen in this Country when the workforce at Bilston rammed the open-hearth furnace to keep the Plant producing. It is with some degree of pride that I saw this happen.¹⁴

But no amount of approbation would save the works. Having earned some breathing space, anxious shop stewards once again turned to Swinton House.

“I Move Bill, Will You Second?”

In what would be the final stage of the steelmaking campaign, Bilston’s frustrated shop stewards finally lost patience with what they perceived to be the ambivalence of their national union leaders. Following the plant takeover, there was an awareness that the success of recent acts of militancy were only palliative. It was, therefore, imperative that union bosses took full advantage of what was a temporary local victory.

The NUB EC’s response to the December 1978 Grosvenor Place meeting had been to informally withdraw their support for the campaign for new steelmaking, with Hector Smith eventually announcing, “There is no doubt that we had set our hat at a Q-BOP development at Bilston. BSC has said this is not to be, so we must now face the

¹⁴ *Man and Metal*, May 1979.

facts".¹⁵ With the majority of the TUCSICC organisations following suit, an anxious BJUAC looked to their most powerful trade union ally, Bill Sirs:

You will of course realise that the BSC having made their position quite clear in relation to Bilston, the Bilston Joint Branches are of course extremely anxious to know what the current national ISTC policy is ... I would wish to reiterate as strongly as is in my power to do so, that we expect ISTC to totally resist bringing Bilston on to a two-furnace operation, and this request, of course, carries with it the 100% backing of ISTC membership at Bilston.¹⁶

The above correspondence was penned by Graham Fazey, who had by this stage assumed the duties of Vice-Chairman.¹⁷ Unlike the benign Reg Turley, the no-nonsense convenor was more cynical of his trade union hierarchy, developing a particularly fractious relationship with Sirs. The two had first come to blows three months earlier, when Swinton House declined to support the Day of Action's symbolic regional stoppage:

The General Secretary read correspondence from the Springvale Joint Committee requesting the Executive Council's support for a one-day stoppage of work which had been called for by the Wolverhampton Trades Council in respect of the threatened closure of Bilston Works. The General Secretary had

¹⁵ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 29 March 1979.

¹⁶ Letter from G. Fazey to W. Sirs, undated, ITSOE, BCA1/5. The BJUAC were specifically looking for a recommitment to the provision to formulate contingency plans protecting members at all non-Beswick plants, not just the Big Five.

¹⁷ With the rigours of eighteen months of ceaseless campaigning were by now taking their toll on the action committee leadership, with Reg Turley having taken a backseat.

replied that our arguments for maintaining the viability of Bilston and the steel industry would be seriously weakened by embarking on this course of action. After consideration it was decided that the request be rejected, and the General Secretary's reply be endorsed.¹⁸

Then, frustrated by Fazey's refusal to abandon industrial action, Sirs described his behaviour as "totally unconstitutional".¹⁹ Snubbing the charges, the BJUAC leader inflamed the situation further by convincing hundreds of Confederation members employed at privately-owned Midland steel mills to temporarily withdraw their labour in solidarity.

The two's relationship was also soured by the BJUAC's close ties with the WB&DTUC; an organisation that had also quarrelled with the General Secretary. In the build-up to the Day of Action, a Trades Council delegation had ambushed a shocked Sirs outside Congress House. In what was an incredibly tense encounter, the Black Country men dared to accuse him of failing to protect his Bilston members. Incensed by the exchange, Sirs ordered Dennis Delay to intervene:

In discussion, reference was made to the possibility of extreme political groups involving themselves in the Bilston situation and it was suggested that the Secretary should warn the Bilston Committee of the unwisdom [*sic*] of this.²⁰

¹⁸ Minutes of ISTC EC meeting, 16-18 August 1978, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

¹⁹ Letter from J. Gavin to G. Fazey, 11 September 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/2.

²⁰ Minutes of TUCSICC meeting, 10 August 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/14.

The Bilston men, nevertheless, ignored the advice, with several militant groups participating in the September 1978 protest. Much to the consternation of the ideologically conservative Sirs, one particular flyer criticised his union for the role it had played in facilitating BSC's closure programme:

The lesson to be drawn from this is that BSC want to use the ease with which the Beswick closures were pushed through with the support of the ISTC leaders ... in order to cut back on running costs all round. Bilston workers are being forced to pay with their livelihoods for an aspect of the world wide capitalist crisis ... the way forward from here is not so clear ... workers must not place any trust in union bureaucrats ... only the workers themselves are capable of stopping the closure [of Bilston works].²¹

The hypersensitive General Secretary focused his ire on Fazey. The two renewed their earlier *contretemps* when a pettifogging Sirs ignored a request for an update on the JPC process. He instead made a completely scurrilous complaint over Fazey's incorrect use of an official Confederation letterhead.²² Then, on the eve of the crunch December 1978 tripartite talks, Sirs involved himself in yet another pointless quarrel when his member refused to withdraw a seemingly innocuous local resolution:

It would appear that if our members are not prepared to accept our advice, notwithstanding all the assistance given to them at Bilston, that the Corporation

²¹ SCLV pamphlet, 11 September 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/3.

²² Letter from W. Sirs to G. Fazey, 20 November 1978, MRC, MSS.36/2000/282.

will be aware of the fact that we have no discipline over the branch and will rebut any proposals that we may make from national level.²³

Hostilities would continue in the days after the Grosvenor Place stalemate. When Swinton House ignored a request to reveal its current position *vis-à-vis* the June 1978 emergency ADC resolution, Fazey conscripted ISTC-affiliated convenors to bombard Sirs with a flurry of correspondence:

May I as the Secretary of the above Branch solicit your continued support for the fight to save the Bilston Iron and Steel Works. Following branch meetings of the above Branch, I can assure you that my members fully support the fight and whilst thanking you for your stand, I have been authorised to write to you and to make it clear that we were grateful for the emergency resolution passed at the Conference in June 1978 and our determination to fight on has not been impaired by anything that has happened since. Indeed the happenings of the last few days which are downright devious have only reinforced our determination to stand and fight. Having served ISTC as a Branch Secretary over a number of years, my concern is that this is a fight not only for Bilston but for other ISTC members at other plants who could be next on the list for closure if BSC was allowed to get its way.²⁴

Informing him that his “attitude” had been a frequent topic of conversation amongst his branch members, one local convenor sought to goad Sirs into action:

²³ Letter from W. Sirs to G. Fazey, 5 December 1978, MRC, MSS.36/2000/282.

²⁴ Letter from C. Baines to W. Sirs, 14 December 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

At a recent Branch meeting, the Branch discussed the attitude being adopted by yourself and the Executive Committee concerning the 'Bilston Situation'. Whilst you have pledged verbal support for the 'Bilston Fight for Survival', you do not seem to be taking any positive steps to ensure that the Bilston plant stays open. It is obvious that BSC are determined to close Bilston. We are just as determined to keep Bilston open, but this situation creates morale problems, especially as BSC has the best 'Dirty Tricks Brigade' in the business. The best way to improve morale is to show the members that their Union is just as determined as they are. So come on Bill! Stop playing it by the book and open up the 'dirty tricks' cupboard! Give your members the positive support that they deserve. This is the resolution passed by the Branch on 6th December, 1978:- "To Bill Sirs and the Executive Committee, this Branch urges ISTC to take positive action to support the Bilston Fight for Survival, in keeping with the resolution passed at the Conference in June 1978". I move Bill – Will you second?²⁵

Astonishingly, a simple request for a personal hearing with the EC would prompt the following response from union headquarters:

Your third point is one with which I cannot agree at all, and I am most surprised that you should be asking for a meeting with the Executive Council. I do not know who has suggested this to you, but this is entirely inconsistent with past policy, that the Executive Council should be called to meet every group of

²⁵ Letter from J. Bailey to W. Sirs, 12 January 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

workers who have a dispute pending. If I was to accede that request, I would be having an Executive Council every day of the year.²⁶

Worse was to come. Fazey was subsequently informed that, due to the ISTC ADC having zero policymaking powers, the June 1978 Scarborough resolution was non-binding and had since been censored by Swinton House. Instead, Sirs revealed he would merely continue to implement current policy concerning plant closures. This did little to reassure Fazey, who complained such ambiguity was causing, “not just a little consternation” amongst Bilston’s ISTC members.²⁷

Concerned by the potential impact of yet another distracting spat with the capricious Sirs, Dennis Turner took over letter-writing duties. The BJUAC Chairman who, unlike Fazey, still enjoyed a warm relationship with his EC, adopted a more diplomatic tone when seeking clarification over Swinton House’s contingency plans:

Whilst not appearing to be ignorant, and I hope you accept not facetious, I am sincerely querist of what our current policy is in relation to closures. It is a fact that practically the whole of our workforce are anticipating and dependent upon a very precise and clear policy on the part of our Confederation as we move into this most crucial period of our struggle ... The Bilston workforce are greatly mindful and appreciative of the mighty blow that was struck for Bilston by

²⁶ Letter from W. Sirs to G. Fazey, 20 December 1978, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

²⁷ Letter from G. Fazey to W. Sirs, 9 January 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

yourself and ISTC, last June, the heartfelt cry that now comes from Bilston is 'let us now in organised labour strike the mightiest blow and finish the job'.²⁸

Although Turner's intervention appears to have mollified his tempestuous General Secretary, Swinton House's reply raised more questions than answers. Peculiarly, it referred specifically to the now completely outdated EC resolution passed in the wake of Elisabeth's mothballing eighteen months prior. Then, in a move that caused further anxiety, Sirs' Deputy catalogued some of the supposedly successful actions his union had undertaken on Bilston's behalf, before proclaiming, "So I think you will agree that we are doing everything possible to assist in maintaining employment at Bilston". The letter ended with a pessimistic view of the plant's future:

However there must come a time when either our efforts will be rewarded or otherwise. If that position arrives, then the Executive Council and Steel Committee, because there are other unions involved, along with the workforce at Bilston will have to decide in their own interests what more can be done under the current circumstances.²⁹

The action committee, however, were not ready to capitulate. When Sirs ignored a plea to visit the works in advance of a SISI dinner in Wolverhampton, senior Confederation shop stewards ambushed their General Secretary as he arrived at the black-tie event. Although the encounter appeared to be cordial, Bilston's steelmen were left underwhelmed by what was proffered:

²⁸ Letter from D. Turner to W. Sirs, 9 January 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

²⁹ Letter from Swinton House to G. Fazey, 16 January 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/5.

The whole situation was completely unnecessary. I mean, why the hell were subs paying [ISTC] members forced to stand in a cold car park just to get an audience with their General Secretary? At times it felt like we were engaged in two different battles. The first was against the Corporation and ... the second was to force the steel union leaders to fight on our behalf. Sirs? ... he was fiddling around as Rome burned.³⁰

Following the plant takeover, a group of steelworkers travelled to Swinton House, where they presented a letter signed by local shop stewards:

It is absolutely paramount that our EC not only pledge their full backing for Bilston at this meeting, but more importantly based on the aforementioned resolution, determine the appropriate decision in order to give practical effect to their decision. This we underline is absolutely essential [sic]! The Bilston workforce, therefore, humbly petition our Executive Council in the best tradition of ISTC to give their unfettered backing to a loyal and conscientious Membership on the Bilston Plant and in so doing win a substantial victory for the case Bilston has in its favour.³¹

Adding their voices were long-time supporters Jack Gavin, Bill Irvine and Alan Farley, who compelled their fellow Executive members to formulate a new national defence strategy on Bilston's behalf:

³⁰ Oral testimony from J. Boulton, recorded 16 March 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

³¹ Letter from G. Fazey to W. Sirs, 20 February 1979, WCA, DW-173/1/4.

For far too long now the workforce at Bilston have carried on the fight for survival seemingly without much national support. ... In conclusion, you are in receipt of a letter of support from all branches at Bilston Works pledging their support to carry on the fight to keep the works open. Let us as the largest Union within the steel industry not let them down.³²

Meanwhile, the action committee looked to place further pressure on Swinton House via *The Steel News*:

The message from the workforce is that the matter is now firmly in the hands of Bill Sirs, general secretary of ISTC and chairman of the TUC steel committee. Feelings at the meeting displayed evidence of the general frustration of the workforce to be given a clear lead at national level ... they are expecting that to evolve within the next fortnight.³³

The Sirs Plan

The lobbying of Swinton House initially appeared to have paid off. Under concerted pressure, Bill Sirs unexpectedly announced a defence plan consisting of:

- a public declaration of Swinton House's unequivocal support for the retention and development of Bilston via an open letter to the press;

³² Letter from A. Farley to ISTC EC, 15 January 1979, WCA, DW-173/1/2.

³³ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 1 March 1979.

- approaching the EEC for the capital (in the form of either a grant or a loan) required to install Q-BOP steelmaking facilities at the plant;
- and/or supporting calls on the Government to arrange a public inquiry into Bilston and the remaining non-Beswick sites.³⁴

He wasted no time in delivering the first element of this strategy, with an open letter to Bob Scholey appearing in the national press and *Man and Metal*. Adopting a conspicuously confrontational tone, Sirs accused management of conducting a campaign of disinformation:

... we have read the ominous signs that have been drifting to us through the medium of the press, by what must be carefully planned leaks, and I cannot see my Executive accepting the Bilston strategy knowing full well from the press reports that your step-by-step process in the White Paper is one similar to the domino theory in which one works after another will ultimately fall.³⁵

He also appeared to publicly involve himself in development policymaking by highlighting the potential benefits of Q-BOP. In a move that brought a momentary sense of joy at Bilston, the letter ended with a clear ultimatum:

You are also aware that the Bilston Works represents to this Union a parting of the ways between the Beswick plants and the other existing plants within the

³⁴ The public inquiry element of the plan appears to have been jointly conceived by Confederation bureaucrats and the BJUAC leadership, though it would be Sirs who was the most vocal advocate of the tactic.

³⁵ *Man and Metal*, January/February 1979.

Corporation ... I therefore urge that if this industry is to continue to receive the wholehearted co-operation that has been given in the past that we must ensure, both the Corporation and the unions, that no action is taken which would break forever the trust and sincerity that still exists.³⁶

Sirs immediately moved onto the second stage of his Bilston strategy; calling on EEC Commissioner for Industry, Étienne Davignon, to provide both political and financial support for the Q-BOP scheme.³⁷ Fellow Europhile Dennis Turner joined his leader on a special mission to Brussels, holding preliminary talks with the powerful Belgian industrialist and his team of advisors.³⁸ Returning to the UK, Sirs transitioned to the final stage of the plan, releasing a press statement demanding state intervention:

It would [a 12-month closure notice] also prejudice the reply being received from a request made by the Union to the Government for a public inquiry to be held on the future of Bilston, with full examination of the facts at which all parties would be able to give evidence and at which the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation would indicate its willingness to accept the recommendations of such an inquiry. We further recommend that the inquiry is composed of three

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Sirs specifically asked the Belgian business magnate for financial assistance in the form of either a grant or a loan. In an attempt to embarrass the Corporation and the UK Government, he went public with the bailout plan.

³⁸ Preliminary talks were encouraging, with an ISTC official telling the press, “[We have] been given some ammunition by Viscount Davignon. I cannot say whether this is in the form of cash or another form of help ... Let’s say the meeting was not unproductive. I understand the EEC has given us the full backing for the works, but we are unsure what form it will take”. See *The Express and Star*, 13 March 1979.

nominated representatives from the trade unions, three from the employers and one completely independent chairman.³⁹

Responding to the sudden flurry of activity at executive level, the action committee leadership adopted an outwardly optimistic stance. Even the obstinate Fazey found the time to thank his General Secretary. Any such contentment, however, would quickly dissipate. In a dismissive retort to Sirs' open letter, a belligerent Scholey again sort to coax the ISTC EC into abandoning Bilston with their reputation still intact; offering compensation packages equivalent to those secured at the Beswick sites. As an added incentive, he disclosed an informal offer to retain the mills as a standalone facility:

I hope that the Steel Committee will agree at its next meeting to discuss with the Corporation the retention of a 5-shift mill and we are, of course, prepared to negotiate appropriate ex gratia payments with you along the lines of the agreement we made during the last year.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, management looked to sow further division by placing Scholey's proposal on departmental noticeboards.⁴¹ Then, when Count Davignon suddenly withdrew his

³⁹ *Man and Metal*, March 1979.

⁴⁰ Letter from R. Scholey to W. Sirs, 30 January 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/6.

⁴¹ The mills-only proposal had already caused outrage amongst a BJUAC leadership who described it as a, "conspicuous conscience solving operation", whilst reminding colleagues that any such offer didn't do, "justice to the substantial case Bilston has in its favour, or to the two thousand jobs approximately, which will still be lost if this option where [*sic*] implemented". See Resolutions, undated, WCA, DW-173/1/4.

support without explanation, Sirs accused Grosvenor Place of sabotaging his appeal to the EEC:

Most surprised and disappointed that after our discussion you have now changed your mind in relation to the proposed meeting regarding Bilston. We are led to conclude that this results from intervention by British Steel Corporation and British Government.⁴²

The unexpected news placed pressure on the impact of the JURUE report on Government and management thinking. Published in March 1979, it represented a deliberate ploy to add weight to calls for a state-sponsored probe, with key sections focusing on the potential wider socio-economic effects of closure:

This proposal [closure], if implemented, would have a number of adverse repercussions on the West Midlands Region and especially on the Wolverhampton and Bilston area. These adverse repercussions, primarily in the form of income and job losses, are particularly unwelcome at this point in time since the West Midlands Region has suffered a marked relative decline in recent years and this decline is exemplified by the particularly difficult conditions that have been and are continuing to be experienced by the Wolverhampton community itself.⁴³

⁴² Telegram from W. Sirs to E. Davignon, 19 March 1979, WCA, DW-173/1/2.

⁴³ JURUE, *The Future of Bilston Steelworks: An Appraisal*, March 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/4, p. 1.

According to Dr. Paul Johnson's team, the human cost would be insurmountable, with the direct loss of 2,500 positions at Bilston as well as a further 300 within its external supply chain.⁴⁴ To draw attention to the seriousness of the situation, these job losses were placed in the context of the regional employment market. In February 1979, Wolverhampton had a jobless rate of 6.1 per cent, which would inflate to 7.4 per cent.⁴⁵ Looking ahead, it was estimated 70 per cent of Bilston's steelmen would be unable to secure immediate employment; a figure that would remain at 30 per cent until March 1985.⁴⁶

The report also demonstrated how the debate surrounding Bilston had been driven by one single criterion: how closure would improve BSC's short-term cash-flow position. Although it was calculated that management would indeed secure a net cash-flow saving of £45.9m, this figure would be offset by a re-adaption bill of £35m, which would fall on the Government and not the Corporation.⁴⁷ By demonstrating how bungling officials were wantonly transferring the burden of a contestable closure onto the British taxpayer, JURUE sought to put public pressure on Whitehall to intervene. The document concluded by calling on policymakers to retain Bilston as a flexible electric arc mini-works as per the JWP proposals.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁵ By way of comparison, the authors provided the corresponding figure in Yorkshire which, at the time, stood at 5.3 per cent. See *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁴⁷ Crucially, this figure didn't include remedial costs required to revitalise the steelworks site and create alternative employment for redundant steelmen. A conservative estimate stood at around £20m, which by far outweighed the cost of installing new steelmaking equipment at Bilston. See *Ibid.*, pp. 61-72.

Its completion prompted the renewed lobbying of Eric Varley and his cabinet colleagues. The Whitehall campaign was coordinated by Bob Edwards who used the press to demonstrate that there was still a clear and unanswerable case for the retention of the state-owned facility:

It produces the cheapest and highest quality iron in any of the steelworks within the structure of the BSC ... Closure of the plant would double unemployment in the Wolverhampton area, which is already plagued by closures of many of its important traditional factories.⁴⁸

A letter, penned by Colin Phips and signed by several West Midlands MPs, was sent to Labour Party officials alongside an abridged version of the JURUE report:

I wish very strongly, to support the request by the Bilston Steelworks Committee for a public inquiry into the closing of the Bilston Works. I am particularly concerned that the overall economic and social impact of the closures upon the Black Country has fully been taken into account in arriving at a decision to close the Works ... I not at all happy that British Steel fully appreciates the extent of the damage that will be done to the Black Country if steelmaking is closed down entirely. The Black Country has been a traditional steelmaking one for nearly two centuries and there are enormous inbuilt skills which are not readily applied to other jobs, even were such jobs available. The social impact in a closely-

⁴⁸ *The Express and Star*, 21 February 1979.

knit area like the Black Country will be particularly dramatic, particularly as it follows upon closures in other industries during recent months.⁴⁹

The BJUAC's political allies were particularly concerned by JURUE's warning over the effectiveness of the Government's regional economic policy:

I am appalled that there does not seem to have been any parallel programme for the introduction of new jobs in the Black Country and this is not helped by the Government's current regional policy. I believe that an inquiry of the kind which the [action] committee seeks would do much to bring in the real size of the problem out and would greatly help in coming to a proper decision about the industrial future of the Black Country. I would be grateful, therefore, if you would be prepared to initiate such an inquiry as soon as possible.⁵⁰

Adding their voices to calls for a state-sponsored investigation were the wives of Bilston's steelmen, whose protest letter targeted sympathetic Ministers:

I write on behalf of a group of wives who are very concerned about the overall situation affecting employment in this area, and who are likely to be hardest hit, together with our children, if this closure, and others which are in the pipe-line takes place. As you are recognised as a fighter for women's rights, and we believe that this fight at Bilston is just as much a cause which we as women should be involved in, equally as the men who work at the plant since we have

⁴⁹ Letter from C. Phipps to E. Varley, 13 February 1979, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

to be bothered about job opportunities for our children, and those not yet born, we hope that we might enlist your support in our campaign.⁵¹

In an attempt to force through a Parliamentary debate on Bilston, Edwards produced a Commons order paper. Meanwhile, Prime Minister James Callaghan was petitioned by local Councillors when opening Wolverhampton's new Civic Centre.⁵²

By seeking to take decision-making powers out of the Corporation's hands, it was hoped that sympathetic members of the Government would end their strict non-interventionist policy. Yet political mediation was not forthcoming. One by one, senior Government officials deferred responsibility, before Gerald Kaufman confirmed there would be no such enquiry:

I fully appreciate the great concern that exists in Bilston about BSC's proposal to end steelmaking at Bilston, but do not think that any useful purpose would be served by an independent inquiry. The British Steel Corporation faces very grave problems: low demand and serious overcapacity have forced down prices and caused the Corporation to suffer enormous financial losses. These issues were considered in the Government's White Paper published in March 1978, 'BSC: The Road to Viability' (Cmnd. 7149), which was prepared following close

⁵¹ Letter from P. Turner to R. Short, undated, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

⁵² Officials cornered Callaghan before the local ribbon-cutting ceremony, with one asserting his Government would be, "pulling the plug out of the bath" by shutting Bilston. Alan Clay, a local teacher, complained about the impact closure would have on the prospects of school leavers, "never have we had so much difficulty getting pupils in the fifth years into jobs". The Prime Minister's response was, however, disappointing. Ignoring calls for a state investigation, he instead sought to silence protestors with talk of generous redundancy cheques. See *The Express and Star*, 21 February 1979.

consultation with the Corporation and the TUC Steel Committee. We concluded that action had to be taken to bring capacity more into line with demand. It is the Corporation's responsibility to decide which plants should close ... the Government's view remains that this is the best way forward in the circumstances.⁵³

The final defence plan proved to be completely ineffective and, as a belated and haphazard policy initiative, was emblematic of the ISTC's fire-fighting approach to defending individual sites. Sirs' open letter to BSC was effectively a reworking of the spurned Delay Paper, itself a rehash of the Ayles, Bilston Dimension and interim JURUE documents. The EEC approach was doomed from conception, with Brussels already backing BSC's post-Road to Viability closure programme. Davignon himself had only recently attached his name to a plan to massively reduce the Community's overall capacity in line with current demand and, therefore, had very little interest in releasing significant capital funds to retain Bilston.

The call for a public inquiry was also implausible. The March 1978 White Paper had the effect of permanently altering the political landscape, with Stephen Young identifying an "increasingly ruthless determination" amongst Government officials to execute BSC's closure plan.⁵⁴ There were other warning signs. In October 1978, during the Labour Party conference, NEC member and future Chairman, Alan Hadden, endorsed the Corporation's overcapacity/overmanning argument, whilst Eric Varley refused to meet with a delegation from Bilston. Days later, when responding to their

⁵³ Letter from G. Kaufman to C. Phipps, 6 March 1979, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

⁵⁴ Young, *National Steel Strategy*, p. 406.

Q-BOP proposal, onetime ally Les Huckfield merely trotted out the position adopted by his Minister:

As I am sure you will appreciate it is for BSC, and not for the Government, to make investment proposals, exercising its commercial judgement to assess which projects will best meet the requirements of the market ... I hope you agree that we should leave the matter in their hands, although we are, of course, keeping in very close touch with the situation.⁵⁵

Following the October 1978 Blackpool summit, the BJUAC were so concerned by the PLP and NEC's stance that Turner had taken the unprecedented step of appealing directly to the Conservatives. An informal approach was made via Charles Irving, who had developed an unlikely friendship with the action committee Chairman when unsuccessfully contesting the Parliamentary seat of Bilston eight years prior. The MP for Cheltenham arranged for Turner to meet Norman Lamont, shadow Industry Minister. A rising star in a reinvigorated opposition party, the MP for Kingston-upon-Thames had close links to BISPA and Sir Charles Villiers – and had previously displayed an interest in the potential of a Q-BOP mini-works. Aware of this, Turner suggested this could form the cornerstone of any future Tory Government development strategy. However, after consulting industry officials, the future Chancellor adopted a similar position to that of his Labour Party counterparts:

As regards the prospect of Bilston becoming a pilot plant for the Q-BOP process, I have suggested this to the Corporation and I understand that they

⁵⁵ Letter from L. Huckfield to D. Turner, 9 October 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

have looked at it in some detail. I am bound to say, however, their initial reaction is that it is not all that satisfactory ... Naturally I have indicated to the Corporation all the points that you made to me during our meeting, but there do seem to be very considerable obstacles to finding a viable future for Bilston ... I trust the Corporation will continue to consult with unions about any practicable alternatives to closure. However, in the end the future of any plant must be one for the management of the Corporation, rather than for Ministers or Shadow Ministers.⁵⁶

As an avowed working-class socialist, Turner's willingness to temporarily cast aside his political beliefs reveals not only his pragmatism, but the lack of faith he had in senior Whitehall figures:

... Government Ministers were watching very carefully; they weren't intervening but they were watching to see just how we were treated by British Steel, although I think generally they would have wished to have encouraged a quiet closure of the plant.⁵⁷

They were, of course, right to be anxious. In December 1978, only days before management threw out the Q-BOP proposal, cabinet members met to discuss the short-term prospects of the industry. It was at this very point that the Government decided to sanction the closure of the remaining 'high-cost' plants. The meeting was later summarised by attendee Tony Benn:

⁵⁶ Letter from N. Lamont to D. Turner, 18 September 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/5.

⁵⁷ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, p. 13.

EY Committee began at 10.10 with Gerard Kaufman ... said there was substantial overcapacity in the steel industry and the situation would deteriorate further with the coming on stream of the new integrated steel plants at Ravenscraig and Redcar.⁵⁸

Varley was, nonetheless, ordered to continue speaking to doomed workers and their unions, despite their fates having already been sealed. Sirs and the BJUAC, henceforth, forlornly requested the support of a Government that no longer possessed the political will to intervene. Days after the Q-BOP proposal was dismissed, the General Secretary led TUCSICC officials into a hearing with the Minister. Although Varley accepted management's treatment of Bilston was "incomprehensible", he stuck to the principles of the Road to Viability by categorically rejecting calls to personally intercede whilst formal consultations were still taking place.⁵⁹

With the Sirs plan faltering, his Executive acknowledged their own deficiencies by agreeing that, at some point in the future, they would need to re-examine, "the whole position of future closures and make decisions on their future policy".⁶⁰ This would eventually come twelve months later but, for now, Bilston's fate rested entirely on BSC's response to the JURUE report.

⁵⁸ T. Benn, *The Benn Diaries: New Single Volume Edition* (London, 1995), p. 458.

⁵⁹ *The Birmingham Post*, 26 January 1978.

⁶⁰ Minutes of special ISTC EC meeting, 25 January 1979, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

Dismissing the JURUE Report

In an attempt to rally his troops for one final push, Dennis Turner publicly praised Eric Varley's decision to reject calls for a state inquiry, suggesting it signalled BSC were considering the recommendations of JURUE.⁶¹ The alacrity of the habitually optimistic shop steward, however, masked a painful truth: he and his fellow steelmen had been abandoned by their Government. The plant's fate now rested in the hands of hostile industry officials. The outcome was inevitable.

The action committee travelled to Grosvenor Place for talks only days after the release of the Aston University study. Bolstered by the news from Whitehall, a self-assured Bob Scholey adopted a markedly rigid stance. Despite admitting that some of the commercial judgements made by the JURUE team were entirely accurate, he categorically rejected calls for investment. When explaining the decision, his negotiating team pointed to Government policy:

The Government's White Paper 'British Steel Corporation – The Road to Viability (Command 7149) made it clear that there is no case at present for new starts on steelmaking (para. 12). It also emphasized [*sic*] that to achieve financial viability it is necessary for capacity to move more into line with demand. The Government thus supports the Corporation's view that there should be no new investment in steelmaking capacity at Bilston ... Despite the problems of social adjustment which will occur, the Government has laid on the management of the Corporation the prime duty of putting the Corporation back

⁶¹ *The Express and Star*, 14 March 1979.

on the road towards financial viability. The price of failing to do this would be industrial and social costs in the UK which would dwarf anything contemplated at the present time.⁶²

Meanwhile, a report prepared by John Pennington scoffed at concerns over the socio-economic impact of closure:

The forecast of job losses and their impact on local unemployment rates as portrayed in the Report is unduly pessimistic, particularly if account is taken of the possibility of a five shift mill option, the continuation of other activities on site and the strong likelihood that a substantial number of employees will seek early retirement ... Most of BSC's major operations are in areas of above average unemployment. Closures have already had to occur in exceptionally high unemployment areas and have involved social costs. Regarding the replacement of lost jobs, the Wolverhampton area has suffered substantial redundancies in the last few years and has shown considerable resilience in absorbing job losses which demonstrated that the process of adjustment is likely to be faster than the Report indicates. BSC (Industry) will have a considerable role to play in this connection. Bearing these points in mind, the forecast of social costs in the Report could be reduced significantly.⁶³

⁶² Minutes of special meeting between the TUCSICC and BSC, 16 March 1979, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/15.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Responding to a personal plea from Bill Sirs, Scholey discussed the impact retaining Bilston would have on the future prospects of the Big Five. Outlining what he referred to as the “systems effect”, the Chief Executive contended that any cash-flow savings resulting from closure would deliver, “more security for those jobs that remained within the industry”.⁶⁴ This line of argument, which was tied to the overcapacity/overmanning narrative, had previously been trotted out by management to justify the rundown of Bilston. When announcing the ‘Big Lizzie’ decision, for example, management refused to discuss the plant’s profitable record in isolation:

Mr Murray stated that he felt there was no point in just talking about the results of the past year at Bilston and Wolverhampton, but that it was necessary to look at the total scene to understand just how serious the situation was. He referred to the nation’s deep trade recession which started early in 1975 and which was thought would improve last year but to the contrary slipped back very markedly and the same situation existed in the rest of Europe ... It had put into complete disarray forecasting and the methods by which they are put into practice.⁶⁵

The systems effect was consequently adopted by Pennington when rejecting the findings of the JWP report and, more recently, in Scholey’s riposte to Sirs’ open letter:

From the contents of your letter it is my view that you have not taken ‘on board’ the ‘systems effect’ – i.e. the effect of investment in new and lower cost steelmaking capacity upon some of the older and less efficient works. As I have

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Minutes of Bilston Works Annual Progress Review meeting, 11 May 1977, WCA, DW-173/1/1.

often described to you and your colleagues, the issue the Corporation has to consider is not whether Bilston on its own has been profitable in the past, but whether the profitability of the Corporation as whole should be improved by around £12.5m per annum if iron and steelmaking at Bilston were closed and steel, which can be produced more cheaply elsewhere, used to feed the mill. As Mr Pennington's letter of 30th May, 1978 pointed out, investment which has taken place in other works, in both the public and private sector, has pre-empted the justification for any new steelmaking at Bilston. I can fully understand the reluctance of the local workforce to appreciate the overall picture, but I do feel that it is necessary for national union leaders to understand that, whilst supporting new investment in one direction, they should also recognise the consequential effects elsewhere.⁶⁶

Moreover, the unions had, for a long time, accepted the premise of the systems effect argument. At the December 1977 meeting between the BJUAC and the Steel Committee, for example, a top official adopted a worryingly similar stance to management:

The Chairman said that having listened to the case put forward by the Bilston workers if looked at in isolation was good. However, as the deputation would appreciate any consideration by the Committee had to be based on the overall situation of the BSC i.e. a plus at one plant mean a corresponding minus at another.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Letter from R. Scholey to W. Sirs, 30 January 1979, ITSOE, BCA1/6.

⁶⁷ Minutes of December 1977 TUCSICC meeting, 4 January 1977, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/11.

That month, during a crisis meeting with BSC, Scholey suggested that unless Bilston's orderbook was rerouted, more modern plants were in danger of becoming a "dead loss".⁶⁸ The minutes of the talks reveal the impact this had on union thinking, with Hector Smith declaring, "If high cost plants were causing Scunthorpe to be pulled down he would talk about [shutting] Shelton, Bilston or whatever".⁶⁹ Indeed, the entire premise of the TUCSICC's longstanding policy of sacrificing workers and plants in order to protect the Big Five can be interpreted as union acquiescence to the systems effect and, in turn, management prerogative. Writing in *Militant Managers?*, SIMA official Greg Bamber would later confirm how this impacted trade union thinking over Bilston:

In separate talks, both with the Steel Committee and SIMA, BSC insisted that it had too much capacity for making special steels and that to survive, BSC had to concentrate production in the Sheffield area ... BSC asked the various union negotiators: 'If Bilston were reprieved, then which works in Sheffield would have to be closed instead?' No union could agree to saving one works at the expense of another. Moreover, no-one could deny that Bilston's plant was antiquated, because BSC had not invested there (BSC had invested heavily in Sheffield and had been diverting orders there in preference to Bilston).⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Minutes of special meeting between the TUCSICC and BSC, 12 December 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/12.

⁶⁹ Minutes of special meeting between the TUCSICC and BSC, 12 January 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/12.

⁷⁰ Bamber, *Militant Managers?*, p. 119.

Upon hearing industry officials dismiss their report, one member of the JURUE team flippantly remarked that not even the Big Five were safe under the current regime. In a calculated response that stunned the room into silence, Scholey agreed, pronouncing that unless Bilston was shut immediately, the future of the entire public steel industry was at risk. Sensing vulnerability on the ISTC side of the union table, Black Bob looked to deliver a *coup de grace* by reiterating his earlier offer to safeguard Bilston's mills in exchange for an immediate closure deal covering the heavy-end. A wary Turner, concerned how his leaders might respond to the proposal, interrupted proceedings by questioning the practicality and sincerity of the proposal:

Mr Turner said that he felt that the mill-only scheme would be more costly to the Corporation than the proposed new investment at Bilston. The mill only option would incur extra costs for importing ingots to Bilston and would lose the present customer flexibility. For these reasons Mr Turner felt that the mill only option was a palliative and offered no long-term future.⁷¹

Then, in what was the first sign of a possible submission, he asked for cast-iron guarantees that any such facility would be ringfenced until March 1982, regardless of future trading conditions. When senior industry officials scoffed at his counterproposal, a typically composed Turner finally lost his patience, sardonically offering to carry Bilston works and its orderbook to South Yorkshire himself. In a response that highlights the strained relationship that had developed between Grosvenor Place and the BJUAC, a pugnacious Scholey called his employee's bluff:

⁷¹ Minutes of special meeting between the TUCSICC and BSC, 16 March 1979, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/15.

Mr Scholey said that he was disappointed that Mr. Turner felt that the retention of the mill at Bilston was not a good idea and asked whether Mr. Turner was recommending that the Corporation should not go ahead with such a scheme?⁷²

With no agreement in sight, an impatient BSC chief terminated the meeting by handing a twelve-month closure notice to the unions. The mistreatment of the JURUE report, like the JWP and Q-BOP proposals beforehand, demonstrate how management weren't in any way receptive to alternative development schemes produced by threatened workers. BSC's dismissive attitude was outlined in a rebuttal paper which, at just three pages, underscored the lack of consideration planners had afforded the study.⁷³ Another insight can be drawn from a meeting between Scholey and Turner following the plant takeover:

... obviously we went to meet 'black Bob Scholey' and, [armed with] the report from Aston University, [which] was a very powerful report and it was very supportive – and I was challenging him to tell me about that report, what was it he could say [would] he challenge [the report], in terms of what it was arguing? And he never offered me one argument; not one. The only thing he said in response to all of that was 'the trouble with you Dennis Turner is that you think

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ BSC, Comments on the JURUE Report: The Future of Bilston Works, undated, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/15.

you know everything'. Well that wasn't a very good response, was it, to such a [major] issue.⁷⁴

The Writing on the Wall

Following the meeting, the TUCSICC reconvened with the BJUAC. The Bilston men, having exhausted all other options, played their final hand by demanding a national stoppage. It was revealed, however, that the Steel Committee didn't possess the constitutional authority to sanction any such action. Abandoned by Congress House, each action committee member would now focus on convincing their own respective Executives to strike.

With SIMA's Robert Muir and the NUB's Hector Smith having tacitly withdrawn their support for the campaign, the only other General Secretary capable of completely halting the industry was Bill Sirs. The ISTC boss, angered by management's treatment of the JURUE report, immediately fired a warning shot at Grosvenor Place:

Further to our meeting today I must inform you that a dispute now exists between this organisation and the British Steel Corporation in relation to Bilston. [I] would request therefore that pending resolvment [*sic*] of the problem that the status quo at Bilston relating to the operation of furnaces shall be maintained.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, p. 16.

⁷⁵ Telegram from W. Sirs to R. Scholey, 16 March 1979, WCA, DW-173/1/2.

Momentarily, a major showdown appeared on the horizon, with a concerned Dennis Delay informing the TUC General Council that, owing to the confusion, a “bad decision may arise”.⁷⁶ The Steel Committee Secretary’s fears, however, were never realised. The next day, at an emergency meeting of their Executive, the BJUAC’s ISTC-affiliates presented their case for industrial action. In a speech that would prove incredibly prophetic, the deputation argued that Swinton House must finally make a stand; not only on behalf of Bilston but for the sake of the entire public sector steel industry. Yet there was little appetite in the room.⁷⁷ Confederation officials, many of whom had previously supported strike action at Scarborough, questioned the level of support they would receive in their respective divisions.⁷⁸ Despite agreeing to defer any final decision until the following month, Sirs would subsequently tone down his earlier rhetoric, “I would always hesitate to embark on strike action. I am against strikes generally and if they can be avoided, they should be. Quite often there are other ways”.⁷⁹

The ISTC’s hesitancy was infectious, with the NCCC, the TGWU and the GMWU each ignoring the BJUAC’s strike plea. Indeed, the rival steel unions had traditionally held completely divergent attitudes towards adopting radical industrial action, particularly on behalf of individual works. In June 1978, when discussing ways in which to respond

⁷⁶ TUC inter-departmental correspondence, D. Delay to L. Murray, 16 March 1979, MRC, MSS.292D/611.432/43.

⁷⁷ Minutes of special ISTC EC meeting, 16 March 1979, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

⁷⁸ Despite their judgement, workers at both Corby and Shotton implored their EC to strike on Bilston’s behalf.

⁷⁹ *The Guardian*, 17 March 1979. It was decided that any final decision should be deferred whilst each EC member took the opportunity to reflect on their position, yet it was clear very few of the 21-man body would agree to industrial action.

to the Corporation's treatment of Shelton, officials from the craft and general unions proposed a national stoppage, but this was met with opposition from their counterparts within the industrial unions. Since his appointment four years earlier, Sirs had developed a habit of threatening strike action, only to then backtrack. In the case of Scarborough, Martin Upham revealed his boss wasn't necessarily motivated by the actual closure order at Bilston but more the manner in which it was being communicated.⁸⁰ During his August 1978 visit to the Black Country, Sirs refused to formally recommit to the threat, claiming he didn't possess the required authority. A month later, at Congress, he warned that a serious confrontation was looming over the plant. Unbeknownst to the Bilston men, he and his fellow TUCSICC officials had already privately agreed to only defend the works through "normal channels".⁸¹ More recently, there was the open letter to Scholey, which warned of a "parting of ways", and the telegram sent in response to BSC's rejection of the JURUE report.⁸²

Notwithstanding his public demeanour, Sirs was ideologically opposed to militant strike action, writing in his autobiography, "any fool can strike".⁸³ When previously asked by the WB&DTUC for assistance in arranging a symbolic Black Country-wide general strike on the Day of Action, he flatly rejected their request. Even the 1980 national steel strike would be ordered with a great deal of hesitancy:

⁸⁰ Upham disclosed, "The subtle point that failure to give warning and not closure itself was the occasion of the strike call was lost on many". See Upham, *Retrospect and Prospects*, p. 10.

⁸¹ More ominously, the TUCSICC decided they would reassess their position if the Government still refused to intervene after consulting the JURUE report. See Minutes of TUCSICC meeting, 7 September 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/13.

⁸² Swinton House ignored repeated calls from Graham Fazey to substantiate Sirs' comments.

⁸³ Sirs, *Hard Labour*, p. 4.

BSC was given approximately three weeks' notice of the strike and, while some might criticize this delay, we were, and are, a union of high principles and wanted to allow the industry, the Corporation and the government breathing space to reflect and then resolve the situation.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, with news of Bilston's inevitable demise starting to spread, the BJUAC's network of stakeholders withdrew their support. Black Country Labour MPs ignored desperate pleas from workers, whilst local officials and the press began openly talking of defeat.⁸⁵

Crestfallen, Turner and Fazey returned to the West Midlands, where they were met by a divided shop-floor. Cracks had first appeared following the rejection of the Q-BOP proposal, after which a permanent sense of fatalism appears to have taken hold of a growing number of melting shop workers. Days later, ISTC Springvale No.1 – led by BJUAC affiliate Jack Jones – penned a resolution determining a “dispirit of indecision” had caused uncertainty amongst its 500 members.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁸⁵ The men were rocked by a cartoon printed in *The Sandwell Evening Mail* unfairly criticising local NUB members for profiting from idleness. An angry lodge official defended the actions of his colleagues, “Some of the lads are incredibly upset. They felt they were being treated unkindly for something which was not their fault in the first place. They are a good set of blokes, and over the years have put in a great deal of hard work and loyalty to the steel industry”. See *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 16 November 1978.

⁸⁶ Jones had been unenthused by the Q-BOP project, raising concerns over the practicality of Aylen's proposal. Its rejection then saw an immediate change in attitude amongst him and his fellow branch leaders.

[The] branch wishes to ask you if on [sic] the meeting with the BSC on the 6th Dec if a decision can be made about there [sic] future, the members expressed at the meeting that they were unable to plan for the future of there [sic] lifes [sic], they were furious over a report in the local paper of Wolverhampton trades council to delay the final decision (I enclose the cutting) so the Springvale 1 branch are asking for a decision if possible on [sic] your meeting on Dec 6th.⁸⁷

Melting Shop Manager Bryn Jones noted the presence of an irrevocable malaise amongst his men:⁸⁸

People are just trying to get away with things when they know the items are not up to standard. In today's market a half-pint service wins no new business and loses old customers. And on current figures it seems that about a third of our customers are not getting a full pint from us.⁸⁹

When a safety drive floundered, Bilston's disillusioned steelmen invited further criticism:

The major part of the effort generated in this campaign has been management inspired. There has been a disappointing lack of response from trade union shop-floor representatives, which points to a total failure of communication ...

In some cases it was only accepted in the areas of direct concern, i.e. traffic

⁸⁷ Letter from J. Jones to W. Sirs, 24 November 1978, MRC, MSS.36/2000/258.

⁸⁸ The dispute was particularly difficult for Jones to bare. The Bilston native had always enjoyed a close relationship with melting shop workers who had previously raised money for his terminally ill son.

⁸⁹ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 2 November 1978.

and transport departments. At Bilston Works there was local management commitment. In fact, the limerick competition was won by the manager of the chemical laboratory. The general situation at Bilston, however, meant there was not a great deal of co-operation from industrial grades.⁹⁰

After penning their letter to Sirs, the leaders of ISTC Springvale No.1 became completely estranged from the BJUAC and the campaign itself. Indeed, branch leaders appeared reluctant to participate in the plant takeover, with one convenor later declaring:

I am not certain in my own mind that the action group way is the best at this moment in time. The majority of the melting shop personnel feel that the fight to retain Bilston steelmaking is lost, and the issue now before us is one concerning the best possible closure terms. Personally speaking, I think we would do as well negotiating now as later ... The difficult question, which each worker must answer for himself is: 'Do we get more or less by fighting on'? Each individual must consider this very seriously.⁹¹

A confrontation was inevitable. Following an extraordinary melting shop branch meeting, campaign supporters involved themselves in a heated exchange with Springvale No.1 officials. The unsavoury affair was recounted in formal statement published in the works newspaper:

⁹⁰ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 16 November 1978.

⁹¹ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 1 March 1979.

At a quite stormy meeting, and after much difficulty, the branch was satisfied ... that a resolution should be sent to Mr Sirs demanding his presence at the Bilston plant to tell the workforce where we are going ... When the official business of the branch had been concluded men from the finishing end of the plant – at their own request – had discussions with the branch. After what was once again heated and lengthy discussion, it was quite apparent that the feelings of those men ran parallel to those of the branch.⁹²

Dissension wasn't restricted to production workers alone, with tensions between pro-BJUAC production workers and staffers also escalating. The likes of Reg Turley and David Hamilton, as leaders of the Joint Staff Branches Committee, had been able to placate all previous discord, but disgruntled supervisory staff would now act with impunity. At the aforesaid February 1979 mass meeting, Turner was forced to plea with workers to fight on until the release of the JURUE report. Some staffers responded by demanding a written ballot to gauge popular opinion. When Turner blocked the request, several staged a symbolic walk out. Frank Wall, leader of the ISTC Springvale Supervisory Branch and a longstanding critic of Turner, immediately sought to exploit the changing atmosphere around the plant. The accomplished wordsmith thereby penned an open letter accusing his counterpart of coercion:

It both saddens and annoys me that so many people are afraid to freely express themselves, for fear of reprisals ... impassioned – even frenzied – accusations of Judas and Jeremiah [has] sufficed to bring embarrassment and shame to

⁹² *Ibid.*

bear, and so stifle this fundamentally democratic process. What a nauseating spectacle this made! ...⁹³

Previously, the outspoken shop steward had been viewed as little more than a rabble-rouser by manual grade convenors, but he would now become the principal architect of popular dissent. Excerpts of his letter featured in *The Steel News* and a local newspaper article exposed the views of those men the action committee had come to brand 'cut and runners' or 'head turners':

The closure makes me really sad, and I have fought it for two years, but I think we are at the end of the road. The Jobs here at Bilston are finished. We have tried to keep them [*sic*] open but it isn't worth fighting anymore. I am reaching the finishing line myself and I think we should accept the money and go.⁹⁴

Until this stage, both the success and legitimacy of the action committee had centred on presenting the edifice of a united shop-floor to the outside world. The cork, however, was now firmly out of the bottle. Aware of the potential impact these reports would have on the attitudes of trade union leaders and policymakers, they desperately scrambled into action. Graham Fazey sent a message reminding shop stewards of how the September 1977 two-part resolution locked all branches into the campaign until the bitter end. Turner, meanwhile, quelled talk of voluntary redundancy by disingenuously claiming management were seeking to offer heavily reduced financial packages.

⁹³ *The Steel News: Bilston and Wolverhampton Edition*, 11 April 1979.

⁹⁴ *The Express and Star*, 22 March 1979.

These and other blocking tactics had once tempered any pockets of potential discordance but, with the workforce dividing into two camps, they were completely futile. Dissenters quickly turned on action committee leaders, with Graham Howe recalling:

Cut and runners, we used to call them [laughs]. I would say they were definitely the minority, but we did have our cars scratched and tyres let down, and things like that. We had a bit of that. It was obviously some people who wanted to get away. I mean not everybody wanted to stay. The money was a big lure.⁹⁵

As the campaign's figurehead, Turner became a target of abuse, with 'Dennis is a bastard' scrawled on canteen walls by disgruntled workers. Decades later, a contemplative Turner reflected on this changing mood:

... what we called the 'cut and runners', the ones that didn't want to fight for their job, they felt that there was a pot of gold waiting for them and all they'd got to do was just give up the fight and just receive a pot of gold. Well, we all knew that was never going to be the case; that the only way they were ever going to be properly compensated for the loss of their job was if they were seen to be fighting conscientiously, all the way through to retain the jobs ... There was even physical fighting over people saying: 'We want to get out of here; we want the money'. We said: 'That's not what we set the campaign up for'.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Oral testimony from G. Howe recorded 25 January 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

⁹⁶ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, p. 11.

With the BJUAC's legitimacy in question, attempts at encouraging solidaristic action were superseded by branch autonomy. When Hector Smith travelled to the Black Country to speak to his members, he discovered a much-changed collective attitude. A recent report revealed their worsening mental health, with the boost generated by his earlier intervention over pay proving only temporary. Following a frank discussion, Smith announced to the press that he had been asked by local blast furnacemen to negotiate an early closure deal.

The NUB lodge's decision opened the flood gates. Within hours of the influential General Secretary's departure, all staff and middle-management branches had also capitulated. They were inevitably joined by the plant's 500 melting shop workers who passed the following resolution:

That this branch now feels that after a long sustained fight to keep steelmaking at Bilston it will not be possible to hold the members after the 12th [April], we therefore ask you and the Executive Council to accept our feelings that ... negotiations should be entered into at once with a view to getting the best settlement you can.⁹⁷

Upon receiving word of these local events, Bill Sirs made the following recommendation to his EC:

⁹⁷ Letter from J. Jones to W. Sirs, 30 March 1979, MRC, MSS.36/2000/260.

The General Secretary felt that everything had been done through the procedures available for the retention of steelmaking at Bilston. Our members at Bilston were now seeking from the Executive Council a final decision and it was felt that if nothing more could be done, then we should seek the best possible deal for a Severance Payments Agreement. After full consideration the Executive Council expressed their appreciation of the fight put up by the General Secretary ...⁹⁸

Before going through the formality of ratifying the decision with the TUCSICC, he made a personal visit to the Black Country to speak to senior shop stewards. One witness reflects on what was discussed:

We were told that there was nowhere left to turn. He [Sirs] explained that he had tried absolutely everything in his power ... placed his reputation on the line, but it wasn't to be. He promised to secure us the best possible compensation deal, which he presented as some sort of victory. Talk of record-breaking redundancy cheques and the retention of the mills placated the bulk of the men ...⁹⁹

Having been criticised by commentators and some of their more disgruntled members, the EC released a statement defending its actions:

⁹⁸ Minutes of special ISTC EC meeting, 11 April 1979, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

⁹⁹ Oral testimony from anonymous recorded 15 October 2014, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

In return this Executive Council has shown its strongest support, particularly since last June, for our Bilston members. The General Secretary has made representations and presented arguments both to the British Steel Corporation and the Government, and ultimately to the European Community ... and whilst it does appear on this occasion a case of planning going haywire, we are faced with a problem that our arguments for the installation of Q-BOP or electric arc furnaces is not acceptable to both the British Steel Corporation and the Government, which leaves us with old type open hearth furnaces operating without hot metal ... As an Executive Council we have therefore been obliged to give full consideration to the possibility of taking further steps to keep open the open hearths at Bilston. We are aware, however, of the constant pressures upon the General Secretary to bring this matter to a conclusion, and we have now received a report from the General Secretary, whom has stated quite clearly that he has used every available argument and resource to keep Bilston open as an iron and steel producing plant, and we have come reluctantly to the conclusion that it would be in the interests of all concerned to take away the frustration and confusion by asking the General Secretary to involve himself in negotiations that would result in maintaining the mills at a level of operation satisfactory to this organisation, and negotiating severance terms with the Corporation for our members that will give them a long-term cushioning effect against further unemployment. This decision has been taken after long and difficult decisions in which ultimately all our members were agreed as to what should be the final course of action.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Minutes of special ISTC EC meeting, 11 April 1979, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

The next morning TUCSICC officials agreed to negotiate an immediate closure deal, with management scheduling redundancy talks in May 1979. The battle for iron and steelmaking was over.

Determined to preserve their reputations as tough negotiators, the steel unions sought to secure the best possible deal for their frustrated members. Ahead of talks, Congress House announced it would be seeking “special consideration” for employees who, they charged, were being made “sacrificial lambs”.¹⁰¹ It was eventually agreed that 1,750 heavy-end workers would receive an *ex-gratia* sum of 70 weeks’ pay. Overall, the deal was worth a record-breaking £11.6m, with some long-serving employees receiving £22,000.¹⁰² Turning to the surviving mills, the BJUAC demanded:

- a 15-shift configuration employing approximately 600 production workers;
- a firm commitment that BSC would invest in existing plant and machinery;
- a guarantee that the mills-only operation would be retained for at least a decade.

However, management were only prepared to support a five-shift operation employing approximately 400 steelmen, whilst no cast-iron assurances were given over the facility’s long-term future. This, as will be outlined in the next chapter, made the facility extremely vulnerable to future rationalisation, particularly with the election of a hostile Conservative Government on the immediate horizon.

¹⁰¹ Minutes of meeting between the TUCSICC and BSC, 12 April 1979, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/15.

¹⁰² Memorandum of agreement, 1 May 1979, WCA, DW-173/1/1.

Conclusion

Having rejected the men's latest survival bid, management raised the stakes: threatening to unilaterally reduce steelmaking operations whilst attempting to entice workers with record-breaking redundancy cheques. BSC had, however, again misjudged the strength of resistance. Unperturbed, senior industry officials adopted a range of insidious tactics designed to undermine prevailing shop-floor solidarity by splitting the workforce into two warring camps. These cynical acts merely impelled desperate shop stewards to adopt a more militant stance than at any stage in the campaign. The plant takeover, a final act of defiance that was entirely conscious stricken, forced management into pursuing a temporarily deferment agreement. Under concerted pressure, Bill Sirs was obliged to act.

Yet the General Secretary's February 1979 plan was typical of his leadership: a slapdash strategy that constituted little more than a sop designed to appease aggrieved members. Meanwhile, encouraged by their Government's non-interventionist stance, Grosvenor Place stymied the convincing JURUE report. With the ideologically restrained steel unions inevitably refusing to respond to frantic calls for radical industrial action, the campaign fell apart. Abandoned by both their unions and their Government, the BJUAC leadership became the target of disgruntled workers seeking head-turning redundancy cheques. In the past, local shop stewards had been able to successfully placate any signs of discord, but they were now helpless in the face of widespread financial self-interest.

Internal divisions were inevitable, with accusations of coercion and intimidation unfairly levelled at Dennis Turner and his supporters. These personal attacks would have deeply affected a BJUAC Chairman who prided himself on his ability to unite co-workers around the abstract values of fraternal solidarity, kinship and community. This represented an unedifying end to a hard-fought and incredibly draining decade-long grassroots campaign. Ultimately, the actions of management, assisted by apathetic Government and union officials, deeply affected Bilston's battle-weary rank and file.

With the permanent cessation of iron and steelmaking secured in May 1979, Bilston's remaining steelmen were forced to endure a worsened political and economic climate. The next chapter explores the millmen's experiences at the hands of a hostile Conservative Government and a ruthless new BSC Chairman. Although they would ultimately succumb to another round of rationalisation, the chapter demonstrates how their leaders proceeded to dominate the town's social and political landscapes for over a quarter century.

Chapter 8: Post-steel Bilston

This chapter begins by investigating union responses to workplace restructuring under the Margaret Thatcher Conservative Government elected in 1979. Highlighting the combined effect plant closures, the January 1980 national steel strike and the policies of a new management team had on TUCSICC thinking, it measures the effectiveness of a pan-organisation national campaign undertaken on behalf of the Big Five. In doing so, the chapter demonstrates how union officials finally contested management prerogative by publicly refuting the basis of BSC's decade-long development and rationalisation programme.

This flurry of activity came too late for Bilston's surviving millmen, whose experiences are briefly documented. With the remainder of the works closing in July 1981, the chapter investigates the social and economic landscapes of post-industrial Bilston, as well as the experiences of redundant ex-steelworkers struggling with life outside the plant. A central focus here is the activities of Dennis Turner and his former BJUAC colleagues who, after reforming as a welfare cooperative on abandoned works property, looked to attend the needs of a community suffering from the social isolation and economic deprivation caused by long-term unemployment. The chapter concludes by revealing how the co-operators continued to participate in community and political activism, culminating in Dennis Turner's election to Parliament in June 1987.

A New Threat

Within days of the permanent closure of Bilston's heavy-end, the UK had a new Government. An early act of the Conservatives was to place strict cash limits on the state steel industry in a completely illogical attempt to strong-arm management into breaking even.¹ Predictably, this prompted Grosvenor Place to target extensive labour economies by way of unprecedented mass redundancies and plant closures. In the first meeting between the TUCSICC and senior industry officials following the May 1979 election, Bob Scholey revealed the industry faced the prospect of insolvency unless drastic bilateral action was taken. The Corporation's chief henchmen then warned that a major confrontation would occur if the unions attempted to block any future de-manning initiatives. Dennis Delay's personal comments on the June 1979 talks reveal a new sense of urgency in management thinking following the election:

At a meeting of the (so called) Joint Planning Committee on Monday, June 11, the BSC side made plain that they were determined to take drastic and swift action to get the Corporation out of its present predicament. Their attitude pretty clearly had been shaped in the discussions which they have been having with the Government. These appear to have made them, on the one hand, desperate, because of the financial strait-jacket the Government has

¹ In opposition the Conservatives had adopted a hostile attitude towards the public sector steel industry, with Margaret Thatcher's Parliamentary Undersecretary Ian Gow introducing a Private Members' Bill demanding re-privatisation. The party's April 1979 election manifesto had then vowed to set BSC a "clearer financial discipline in which to work". See Conservative Party, *1979 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto* (London, 1979). For a detailed study of the overall impact of so-called 'Thatchernomics' on traditional British industries, see A. Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, 2nd ed. (London, 1994).

now forced on them; and, on the other hand, confident that the Government will not intervene if the Committee appeal to the Minister to make the Corporation go easy.²

Days later, new DTI boss, Sir Keith Joseph, confirmed annual cash limits had indeed been capped, meaning all operational losses were expected to be covered by internal cost savings. Responding for the opposition, James Callaghan warned the steel unions:

Sir Keith Joseph has a pistol at your heads. Some of you who know the steel industry well tell me that it will simply not be possible to operate beyond March 1980 without some further financial loss being incurred. I am told that the only way to meet Sir Keith Joseph's target may be to close a major modern works.³

The former Prime Minister's prediction would ultimately prove prophetic. In the meantime, under insurmountable pressure from their Whitehall paymasters, management set their sights on shutting all remaining facilities outside the Big Five and South Yorkshire.

Following the expedited closure of Corby and Shotton, planners submitted the 'Radical Review' paper, setting out BSC's short-term plans. But with Joseph said to be underwhelmed by their limited scale, Scholey returned with the more ambitious

² TUC inter-departmental correspondence, D. Delay to L. Murray, 19 June 1978, MRC, MSS.292D/611.432/43.

³ *Man and Metal*, September 1979.

‘Business Proposal’. This revised restructuring proposal envisaged cutting annual manned capacity from 21.5m tonnes to 15m by August 1980:

- 12,000 at multiple sites deriving from future productivity agreements;
- 10,000 at Corby and Shotton;
- 10,000 at Llanwern and Port Talbot;
- 4,000 at Consett (full closures);
- 2,800 at Scunthorpe;
- 2,500 at various finishing sites (full closures).⁴

The plan was met with widespread dismay, with the EEC Commissioner for Employment accusing management of overreacting to the current crisis, whilst at the same time condemning the Government for its indifference to the plight of UK steelworkers.⁵ A much more unlikely critic came in the form of Monty ‘Finish ‘em’ Finniston:

Where is this recession? Last year the world produced around 800m tonnes of steel the largest amount in the history of mankind. The Japanese produce 120 million tonnes a year. Are they cutting back capacity to 80 million tonnes? They export 40 million tonnes against our total planned production of 15 million

⁴ The list included those mills, such as Bilston, which had previously survived the closure of ancillary iron and steelmaking facilities.

⁵ As an alternative, the EEC suggested a work-sharing programme and a ban on all overtime. It also contrasted the British steelworkers’ experiences their European colleagues. A year earlier, steel unions in France signed a deal agreeing to restructure their industry on the condition that there would be no compulsory redundancies, whilst their Government introduced policies designed to limit the social effects of retrenchment.

tonnes. That is marketing. We can make steel as well as anyone else, but we have lost our sense of trading.⁶

The most vocal opponent was Bill Sirs, whose rhetoric following the loss of Bilston had become markedly radical in tone.⁷ The ISTC leader directed his fury towards the Tories who, he promised, would be, “left in no doubt about our wrath and indignation”.⁸ Responding to the rationalisation proposals, he declared his union was preparing for an unprecedented phase of resistance.

This coincided with a round of national pay talks that prompted the first national stoppage in over half a century. The events surrounding the historic 13-week dispute are ably covered elsewhere, meaning only a very brief summary of its causes is required.⁹ Evidence points to the crucial role the Government played in initiating the strike. Originally, BSC was preparing an opening offer of 10.5 per cent but political pressure forced them to adopt what Julia Hartley *et al.* has labelled an “empty pockets approach”.¹⁰ The ISTC were thereby offered a deliberately provocative basic 2 per

⁶ *The ISTC Banner*, July 1980.

⁷ In August 1979, Sirs told *Man and Metal*: “It would be unwise to commit ourselves too early to industrial action against them [the Government], though there is widespread expectation that their ideas and actions may stir enough anger to bring it about ... What the flashpoint may be is open to speculation. It may be the steel industry, where congress has agreed overwhelmingly to put its full strength behind the unions in the coming fight. It may be over Sir Keith Joseph’s plans for pruning nationalised industry. It may be over the onslaught on living standards by means of local authorities imposing cuts at the government’s request”. See *Man and Metal*, September 1979.

⁸ *The Guardian*, 12 December 1979.

⁹ Cottrell, *The Giant*, pp. 123-134; Hartley *et al.*, *Steel Strike*; S. Meredeen, *Managing Industrial Conflict: Seven Major Disputes* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 169-205; Sirs, *Hard Labour*, pp. 88-113; and Upham, *Tempered*, pp. 138-156.

¹⁰ Hartley *et al.*, *Steel Strike*, p. 22.

cent, with an additional 10 per cent tied to the aforementioned de-manning proposals. The deal was rejected out of hand and, with no deal in sight, Sirs ordered his members to withdraw their labour in January 1980.

Although, on the surface at least, the dispute was prompted by the measly pay offer, it must also be placed in the context of past and prospective plans to disembowel the industry.¹¹ Whilst reflecting on what triggered Sirs' decision, *The British Steelmaker* opined that it was a, "Gilbertian quarrel between a loss-making nationalised corporation and a union losing members through technological change and threatened with further contraction because of market conditions".¹² Empirical evidence confirms this assertion. One of the first leaflets produced by Swinton House, titled 'Why we are striking', proclaimed:

Not content with making the lowest offer of the pay round, BSC now plans to destroy 53,000 jobs, adding famous steelmaking towns like Consett and Llanwern to the same scrap heap as Hartlepool, Bilston, Glengarnock, East Moors and Shotton. Twenty-six thousand jobs have already gone since the start of 1978. One steel worker in three will be sacked.¹³

¹¹ Richard Pryke has highlighted the central role rationalisation played in causing the strike, "The Corporation made the mistake of starting with a provocatively tiny offer and many steelworkers were obviously boiling over with anger at the way in which the Corporation had been managed and the job losses that had just been announced". See Pryke, *Public Enterprise*, p. 208.

¹² *The British Steelmaker*, February 1980.

¹³ *Man and Metal*, January/February 1980. Labour historian Hamish Fraser has also identified how the closure of Bilston was a contributing factor to the national strike, contending, "Closures in Hartlepool, Lanarkshire and South Wales were bought off quite quietly, with good redundancy payments, but the abrupt closure of the Shilton [*sic*] and Bilston works and the threat to Corby – all newer places – led to resistance". See Fraser, *A History*, p. 236.

Meanwhile, Martin Upham reveals the impact the recent round of closure proposals had on Swinton House's thinking:

Tabling these proposals at time when pay talks were moving towards a strike is now nearly universally recognised as a unique public sector industrial relations blunder. The ISTC was left with no alternative but to break with its tradition of restraint.¹⁴

The stoppage saw the industrial, general and craft unions stand shoulder to shoulder for 92 days, after which time a Court of Inquiry instructed a 15.5 per cent hike. Notwithstanding union claims of victory, a significant proportion of the sum was wholly dependent on those local productivity deals stipulated by BSC's Business Proposal.¹⁵ The agreement, therefore, opened the door to further retrenchment, with Grosvenor Place immediately looking to impose their will on employees. Speaking in the aftermath of the stoppage, a boastful Sir Charles Villiers declared that its failure had helped purge many illusions from the unions, proclaiming a new sense of reality had taken hold of the shop-floor.¹⁶ 'Mr Pastry', nevertheless, would not bear witness to the post-strike industrial relations climate. In June 1980, the Government replaced him

¹⁴ Upham, *Retrospect and Prospects*, p. 12

¹⁵ In a survey of hundreds of South Yorkshire steelworkers, Julia Hartley *et al.* discovered that a significant proportion of respondents was unhappy with the settlement. Moreover, the vast majority viewed it as a defeat, which they blamed on the ISTC leadership. Following the return to work, the same steelmen called for the sacking of Bill Sirs. See Hartley *et al.*, *Steel Strike*, p. 151.

¹⁶ When asked about BSC's post-strike plans, a defiant Bob Scholey declared, "If we can get the cost cuts we want from de-manning and better working practices we may make gains...". See *The British Steelmaker*, April 1980.

with Ian MacGregor, a Scottish-American businessman known for his confrontational approach to management. The recruitment of 'Mac the Knife' was a clear signal of intent from Whitehall. He was handed what Alisdair Blair has described a "relatively free hand" in eradicating the £545m loss posted by his predecessor in March 1980.¹⁷ MacGregor announced his arrival with a stark message to employees and their unions:

... employment costs will have to be controlled with utmost rigour ... Against this background, BSC is also carrying out a further review of capacity to relate it more accurately to the perceived demand for steel and the opportunities ahead of the Corporation. The present review will involve an examination of further retrenchment, stock reduction and economies in capital expenditure.¹⁸

The TUCSICC were consequently presented with a proposal for the advanced closure of Consett, whilst press rumours suggested the new BSC Chairman was coveting at least one of the Big Five. The battle for the public sector steel industry was about to enter an unparalleled new phase.

Saving the Big Five

The threat was enough to rouse the steel unions from their decade-long slumber. Bill Sirs, buoyed by the strike, at last looked to take the fight to management.¹⁹ In July 1980 he announced:

¹⁷ Blair, *The British Iron and Steel Industry*, p. 579.

¹⁸ *The British Steelmaker*, August 1980.

¹⁹ Sirs, *Hard Labour*, p. 5

We are mounting an intensive publicity campaign because it is essential that our proposals are adopted ... For too long the so-called experts at Grosvenor Place, BSC's lush London headquarters, have been running the industry to ruin. The real experts are on the shop floor, in the mills, the offices and the laboratories. We know what has gone wrong, and we know what needs to be done to put things right.²⁰

The first phase involved the recruitment of a new research team who sought to discredit management by demonstrating how their policy of continuous retrenchment was both unnecessary and damaging to the nation's long-term prosperity. A reinvigorated Confederation Executive thereby displayed a newfound sophistication in communicating with the wider public. The inhouse journal, *Man and Metal*, was replaced with *The ISTC Banner*, a colour broadsheet that adopted a much more confrontational editorial policy than its sterile predecessor.²¹ Overall editorial control was handed to Keith Hill, a disgruntled former Corporation press officer who had crossed over to Swinton House. Under his supervision, *The Banner* successfully challenged those demand forecasts and cost assumptions used by management to justify proposed closures. When rejecting longstanding claims that Grosvenor Place's perilous financial situation had resulted from unreasonable labour costs, Hill and his

²⁰ *The ISTC Banner*, July 1980.

²¹ *The ISTC Banner* had first replaced *Man and Metal* during the strike, when fourteen pamphlet sized versions each debunked many of the myths previously adopted by BSC when justifying rationalisation. These included 'Let us nail the lie', 'What overcapacity?', 'Workers not to blame for high steel prices' and 'How BSC wasted millions!'. For a review of the impact of the *ISTC Banner* during the strike, see C. McGuire, "Going for the Jugular": The Steelworkers' Banner and the 1980 National Steelworkers' Strike in Britain', *HSIR* 38 (2017), pp. 97-128.

research team highlighted the effect central Government fiscal policies and mismanagement had had on cash-flow. Reflecting on post-strike attitudes, Martin Upham wrote:

The strike blew away some of the cobwebs which had obscured debates on steel policy. The Research Department was set free to challenge the assumptions underlying the management case for retrenchment, and seized its opportunity with devastating effect. For a number of years, the parameters of the argument had been defined by BSC; now the chance had come to explode the case for retrenchment and the provocative '0 per cent' pay offer.²²

The period also saw the ISTC involve itself in policymaking by publishing an alternative plan – a 'New Deal for Steel'. The impressive 180-page paperback contended that many of BSC's prospective rationalisation schemes could be abandoned if management:

- slashed prices by 10 per cent;
- secured alternative economies (to labour) by making specific operational and financial improvements;
- took more interest in smaller tonnage orders;
- and/or invested in mini-works and electric arc steelmaking technology.²³

²² Upham, *Tempered*, p. 144.

²³ ISTC, *New Deal for Steel* (London, 1980).

The final two recommendations came as a source of frustration in the Black Country as they had underpinned both the JWP and JURUE reports. Then, in a move that caused further consternation, Sirs enthusiastically supported individual defence campaigns. He threw himself into the so-called 'Consett Crusade', making several visits to the North East plant whilst leading a boisterous march on Westminster with firebrand MP Dennis Skinner.²⁴ Elsewhere, he arranged a fringe meeting at the October 1980 Labour Party conference, rallying the wider labour movement behind Llanwern. Later, during a visit to North Wales, Sirs' leadership was described as an "inspiration" by grateful shop stewards and campaign leaders.²⁵

Unperturbed by the sudden flurry of union activity, the closure stampede continued under MacGregor. After shutting Consett and several mills facilities, he looked to stamp his authority on the unions.²⁶ In October 1980, 'Mac the Knife' revealed the so-called 'MacGregor Plan', a corporate strategy that proposed a reduced overall capacity of 14.4m t/p/a and the dismissal of 25,000 workers. Ignoring a New Deal for Steel, MacGregor undermined Swinton House's authority by organising a ballot gauging workers' views of his plan. Securing a mandate from 78 per cent of voters, he made 14,000 men redundant over the next fifteen months. These measures, however, did little to improve the industry's finances, with weekly losses soaring to £7.2m in September 1982. A re-consideration of medium-term demand forecasts that month

²⁴ He also ordered his new research team to assist the Consett WAC, University of Durham academics, local Government and the County Durham Trades Council in producing a counterproposal to management's closure plan.

²⁵ *The ISTC Banner*, October 1980.

²⁶ The Warrington mills was closed in August 1980 after a mystery fire that some workers blamed on management. Shop-floor resistance at Consett ended only days later.

prompted plans to cut manned capacity to a lowly 8m t/p/a. When pressed, Bob Scholey disclosed that the Big Five were indeed under threat.

The ISTC's immediate response was one of despair, with Sirs expressing frustration over management's contempt for consultation procedures:

In the past few weeks we have had a succession of redundancy and closure announcements. There seems to be no end to the disembowelling of the industry. There is no consultation whatsoever with British Steel on these issues. We are presented with a *fait accompli* on every occasion and this arrogant behaviour has to stop.²⁷

In the aftermath of the strike, a rejuvenated ISTC boss had looked to confront management, only for a new BSC Chairman to covet those plants previously sanctified by Congress House. MacGregor's ongoing assault would, nonetheless, provoke an extraordinary collective response from the steel unions. The 1980 dispute had positively impacted inter-organisational relations, prompting the Steel Committee to provisionally relinquish longstanding rivalries. At the height of the stoppage, they collectivised under the banner of the TUC Coordinating Committee; meeting daily to synchronise overall joint strategy.²⁸ Then, in September 1980, the NUB and Confederation Executives discussed a possible merger in view of, "the contraction of membership of both unions as a result of the steel crisis and the close cooperation

²⁷ *The ISTC Banner*, August 1982.

²⁸ Sirs later revealed that the two union hierarchies became "firm friends and trusted colleagues" during the stoppage. See Sirs, *Hard Labour*, p. 93.

between the two organisations during and since the period of the national strike”.²⁹ Although the prospective amalgamation was abandoned, the two unions continued to enjoy a markedly more positive relationship in the post-strike era. Meanwhile, Sirs also requested the assistance of the wider labour movement, leading to the reinstatement of the so-called ‘The Triple Alliance’:

We are serving notice to BSC senior executives. The Steel strike is over, but the *Banner* is carrying on. Our main interest now is to pressurise BSC and this government, against their will, to maintain a viable steel industry that can meet the country’s needs. That aim has already been placed in jeopardy by past closures. We now look to the whole trade union movement to stand firm with us and save steel.³⁰

By October 1982, inter-union solidarity had improved to such an extent that the Steel Committee unions looked to take solidaristic action to safeguard the Big Five. Agreeing to coordinate a joint national defence campaign, a delegate conference was called in Sheffield, at which Sirs proclaimed:

We do not want to harm the industry, and this stoppage will do minimal damage, but the action has to be taken to show BSC and the Government that we mean business. Unless we act now – united and determined – future generations will never forgive us.³¹

²⁹ Minutes of ISTC EC meeting, 16 September 1980, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

³⁰ *Man and Metal*, March/April/May 1980.

³¹ *The ISTC Banner*, October 1982.

In another clear departure from the past, the Steel Committee involved lay members in policy formation. Acting on the recommendations of delegates, the umbrella body devised an innovative four-point plan:

- coordinate an all-out one-day strike;
- order all worker-directors to resign;
- demand a moratorium on all redundancy talks;
- conduct a wide-reaching PR campaign targeting sympathetic Government Ministers and the voting public.

The strategy represented a complete sea-change in thinking. The steel unions were at last ready to march to the beat of the same drum. Likewise, they adopted a more erudite approach to campaigning. Rather than focusing on pointlessly lobbying uninterested and dogmatic senior industry or DTI officials, Congress House looked to influence the general public, with Sirs conceding, “We can take all the physical action we need, but at the end of the day we have to capture the support of the public”.³² The battle for hearts and minds began with a full-page article in *The Guardian*, whilst steel union leaders conducted a plethora of TV, radio and newspaper interviews. They also toured threatened communities, establishing a huge cross-coalition of local supporters.³³ Elsewhere, the TUCSICC enlisted the support of the leaders of BISPA, the CBI and various national interfaith groups.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ This included private steel companies, constituency MPs, civic leaders, Trades Councils, Chambers of Commerce, churches and numerous community organisations.

Another component was the targeting of sympathetic provincial Tory officials. Attendees of the October 1982 Conservative Party conference, for example, were handed flyers by unemployed school leavers bussed in from threatened steel communities. The exhaustive ten-week protest culminated in a special 'Steel Appeal Day' featuring a mass meeting at Westminster Hall. Approximately 500 guests heard speeches from leading Tories such as Teddy Taylor and Michael Brown.³⁴ Following the ratification of a resolution calling on Parliament to intervene, demonstrators marched on Whitehall.

The pressure campaign, described by the BBC as, "the most relentless and skilful trade union campaign ever" undertaken, proved an unparalleled success.³⁵ Concerned by the threat to Ravenscraig, Minister for Scotland George Younger threatened to resign, whilst his Welsh counterpart, Nicholas Edwards, denounced his own Government for their treatment of Llanwern and Port Talbot workers.³⁶ Under considerable pressure from key members of their own party, the cabinet instructed MacGregor to retain the Big Five until 1986. In another unexpected victory, the Government limited steel imports whilst extending BSC's cash limits. When announcing the reversal, Whitehall specifically mentioned the impact a "tremendously skilled and effective" protest had had on Government thinking.³⁷ For Sirs, the manner of the victory brought a great deal of personal satisfaction:

³⁴ *The ISTC Banner*, December 1982.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ The Conservative MP for Brigg, Michael Brown, also announced he would vote against his Government if any compulsory redundancies were forced on workers at Scunthorpe.

³⁷ *The ISTC Banner*, December 1982.

For nearly three months the steel unions have been campaigning for the survival of the big five integrated steel plants, for further cash aid for BSC and for import controls. We have used political persuasion rather than industrial action. This unique campaign – bringing together people of all political parties and none – has now borne some fruit. I am pleased that the campaign has brought home to the Government the needs of the steel industry and the importance of the industry to the nation ... We are pleased the big five are to continue – they are the heritage of the British people and will be the lynchpin of Britain's industrial recovery. The raising of the cash limits for 1982-83 and for 1983-84 is sensible and just. It is a triumph for common sense. The cash limits were absolutely cut back by the present Government two years ago, and it is apparent that a new realism has crept into Government thinking.³⁸

The deferment of the MacGregor Plan represented a unique episode in the decade-long fight for jobs. But what prompted the TUCSICC to cast aside historic rivalries and coordinate an effective pan-organisation national defence strategy? Why now and not in the defence of viable non-Beswick plants such as Bilston or Consett?

Firstly, wider political events compelled union leaders to act. The election of an ideologically hostile Government, the aforementioned closure proposals and the resultant steel strike, functioned as a binding agent that prompted an extraordinary response. Secondly, the size of the threat was a contributing factor, with a prospective manned capacity of 8m t/p/a representing an unparalleled attack on the industry.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Previous chapters have revealed how steel union leaders were willing to tolerate the rationalisation of older facilities so long as investment in the Big Five was assured. Under Dai Davies' and Sirs' direction, both the ISTC and the TUCSICC had protected the interests of members at smaller, old-fashioned works in a largely perfunctory manner. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the threat to these sacred cows prompted an altogether different response.

The December 1982 celebrations, however, were short-lived, with a familiar pattern of large financial losses, mass redundancies and compulsory closures re-emerging. Backed by the Government, management gutted the Big Five, whilst cynically forcing through the closure of private sector sites.³⁹ Further retrenchment failed to enhance overall performance, with the industry's fortunes not improving until later in the decade.⁴⁰ This turnaround had come at an incredible human cost, with manning levels plummeting to 50,000 by March 1987. The return to profitability eventually prompted the Conservatives to de-nationalise what remained of public sector steel, with the trade unions offering almost no opposition.⁴¹

One vocal critic of privatisation was Dennis Turner who, at the June 1987 general election, had replaced his former mentor Bob Edwards as MP for Wolverhampton South East. The final sections of this chapter explore the former steelman's journey into national politics, as well his time in Westminster which, it is demonstrated, was

³⁹ The Conservatives aggressively bought-out rival steel producers and processors only to shut them immediately.

⁴⁰ Grosvenor Place finally registered its first pre-tax profit in over a decade in March 1987.

⁴¹ For a commentary on the ISTC's failure to oppose re-privatisation, see Upham, *Passages*, p. 89.

heavily influenced by his experiences as BJUAC Chair. But first the short-lived campaign to save Bilston's mills is briefly surveyed.

A Campaign too Far

The action committee's response to the permanent cessation of iron and steelmaking was one of anger, some of which was levelled at steel union leaders. Graham Howe, reflects on the role played by Bill Sirs during the final phase of the campaign:

I don't think he did a lot for our cause. I think, as I say, I was a bit naïve at the time, but he knew the writing was on the wall ... He was privy to a lot more than we were ... they give you superficial backing and say the right things ... paying lip service. He had to be seen to be doing something ... I think it was a done deal, I think they knew but they went through the motions.⁴²

Back in April 1979, a resentful Graham Fazey complained to the press, "We have been let down, not only by our trade unions but the Government too. BSC has demonstrated that it doesn't want the workforce. If the strong are not prepared to look after the weak there is very little the weak can do".⁴³ Unlike Fazey, Dennis Turner adopted an outwardly diplomatic stance, penning a heartfelt message to his EC:

⁴² Oral testimony from G. Howe recorded 25 January 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

⁴³ *The Guardian*, 14 April 1979. With the termination of steelmaking confirmed, both Fazey and David Hamilton resigned from the Springvale ISTC Joint Branches Committee in protest.

... we are very mindful of the positive and helpful contribution that you personally ... have made to our campaign, we are taking this opportunity, whatever the outcome may be to express on behalf of the workforce our humble and sincere appreciation for your help and support. The workforce confirms that the case which has been advanced for Bilston is as strong and substantial as the first day that our campaign began, indeed whatever the outcome, we know that we have won the argument! Even though the case might ultimately be lost.⁴⁴

The two Turner brothers and Ted Wall, ISTC stalwarts to the end, subsequently presented their EC with a special plaque honouring its role in the campaign. The respect was mutual. In a detailed public statement, Swinton House praised the Confederation-affiliated members of the BJUAC:

It is with great appreciation that we have noticed the tremendous fight for survival that is being pursued by our members at Bilston. We are aware that to hold together a workforce against the insidious tactics of holding out large cash payments had been a tremendous feat of persuasion by our officials.⁴⁵

Turner henceforth developed an even closer working relationship with Swinton House, with his Executive inviting him to speak at the Confederation's June 1979 ADC. In a keynote speech that was said to have impressed guest of honour, Prince Charles, the Councillor spoke of the growing problems of joblessness, social isolation and poverty

⁴⁴ Letter from D. Turner to miscellaneous, 28 March 1978, WCA, DW-173/1/4.

⁴⁵ Minutes of special ISTC EC meeting, 11 April 1979, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

in his hometown. Only six months later he was handpicked by his Executive to Chair the West Midlands Strike Organising Committee. Turner's role in organising the stoppage was later recognised by headquarters:

The national strike has stretched everyone's organising ability and ingenuity almost to the limit, but the most pleasing feature has been the way everyone has risen to the occasion ... Because of the comparatively small works by BSC standards in our division the number of pickets available was obviously much smaller. This entailed requesting other divisions to provide a large number of pickets. This brought in its wake problems of accommodation but were overcome as a result of offers received from other unions and Labour organisations and we are thankful for these tangible demonstrations of support.⁴⁶

The election of the Conservative Government had by now politicised Turner even further. At the aforementioned ADC, he called on steelworkers to "fire a warning shot" at Margaret Thatcher.⁴⁷ Then, during the 92-day strike, he was involved in a fiery exchange with the man he had christened Sir 'Thief' Joseph. Meanwhile, Bert Turner, who alongside his former BJUAC colleagues joined his brother's Organising Committee, was arrested for disturbing the peace whilst picketing a private sector steel firm.

⁴⁶ Minutes of special ISTC EC meeting, 18-25 February 1980, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

⁴⁷ *Man and Metal*, July/August 1979.

The return to work did not signal the end of campaigning, with the Corporation immediately ordering a review into the future of the mills. Although management originally promised the unions they would, “establish a soundly based rolling business with maximum flexibility in the longer-term”, The Mount had since ruled out investment.⁴⁸ The facility was in fact rendered unviable by unworkable costs resulting from the closure of the heavy-end. Each ingot had to be delivered from South Yorkshire by road, before being re-heated on site. Costs rose by £7.50 per tonne, meaning that, even if working at full capacity, the facility was doomed to record a guaranteed annual loss of £1.6m.⁴⁹ With demand forecasts predicting an average working capacity of only 53 per cent, this deficit was expected to reach £3.9m per annum. The review, therefore, explored three options:

- the retention of the finishing end and mills in their current format;
- the cessation of hot rolling but the preservation of the finishing line only;
- or full and permanent closure.

The investigation served as little more than a bureaucratic expediency, rather than an independent appraisal of ways in which the facility might be preserved. Before the review had been submitted, its author wrote a confidential memo revealing his sole objective was to, “establish fairly clearly in the minds of the union and works representatives that management do not see a viable future for the Bilston Mill”.⁵⁰ The report, published in June 1980, concluded:

⁴⁸ Minutes of special meeting between BSC and SIMA, 23 April 1979, 755/4/4/4.

⁴⁹ BSC, *Bilston Review*, June 1980, MRC, MSS.365/BSC/56.

⁵⁰ Memo from G. Jordan and B. Howick, 11 June 1980, MRC, MSS.365/BSC/56.

The forecast loss of £3.9m in 1980/81 equates to £9,250 per person working at Bilston. At this level there can be no financial or moral justifications for keeping the plant open unless the future trade forecasts indicate massive improvements in the next 12 months and all the signs are completely opposite to this.⁵¹

Closure was ratified by Grosvenor Place the next month and Bilston's millmen served with a one-year rundown notice. Receiving the news, those BJUAC leaders still employed at the works released a press statement:

There is no question that assurances were given nine months ago that production would go on for three years. The whole episode leaves questions about the corporation's forward planning and general policy. As far as we are concerned the announcement has heralded yet another round in a long fight to save our jobs.⁵²

Turner's experience of the strike, during which he personally coordinated flying pickets manned by militant steelworkers bussed in from South Yorkshire, had a clear impact on strategy. Concerned at the prospect of management starving the mills of orders, a reprised BJUAC devised a three-pronged initiative:

- independently source new orders from private companies;

⁵¹ BSC, *Bilston Review*, June 1980, MRC, MSS.365/BSC/56.

⁵² *The Guardian*, 22 July 1980.

- adopt a strict ‘work-to-rule’ policy;
- and call on colleagues in South Yorkshire to disregard any orders to stop delivering steel ingots to the Black Country plant.

Although these tactics at least ensured the plant survived in the short-term, management brazenly transferred newly acquired orders during the summer shutdown.⁵³ Following the return to work, a mass meeting expressed a desire to negotiate a closure agreement. Despite protests from the BJUAC, word was sent to Congress House and a deal struck whereby the mills would shut in July 1981, though many took immediate redundancy.⁵⁴ Notwithstanding the action committee’s determination to block closure by any means, the workforce could only muster what was described by one trade unionist as a “token level of resistance”.⁵⁵

Explaining the manner of the capitulation, it is clear Bilston’s surviving steelmen possessed neither the physical nor mental fortitude required for yet another campaign. Over the past eighteen months, they had experienced the devastating loss of the heavy-end, a debilitating thirteen-week strike and, more recently, a new, more hostile regime. With the strike costing the average public sector steelman an estimated £1,000 in lost wages, financial matters ultimately came into play:

⁵³ This included custom the BJUAC had secured after reforming.

⁵⁴ Minutes of TUCSICC meeting, 14 August 1980, MRC, MSS.292D/611.41/17.

⁵⁵ Minutes of ISTC EC meeting, 19-21 November 1980, MRC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/10.

But we were out for 13 weeks. Very hard times for a lot of people ... I mean, if you've got a family and you were the only breadwinner the union money didn't do a lot. So it was a pretty hard time.⁵⁶

When we was on strike, and it was I believe the longest steel strike this country has ever had, Linda had just had Zoey, she was six weeks old, and we'd just moved. They [colleagues] had a whip round on the picket lines and we had nearly £200 ... [but] things were tight. It was so unexpected ... It was a desperate time, because we had no money. If it hadn't been for Rob's mom and dad and my mom and dad buying our groceries, I don't know how we would have survived.⁵⁷

... we knew we'd lost it. Even though Dennis wouldn't admit that, he'd still fight to save one job if I know Dennis, because that's the way he was.⁵⁸

At Bilston, this issue was compounded by management's commitment to starve the mills, leaving returning workers contemplating the prospect of receiving heavily reduced earnings under the GWW. BSC, therefore, deliberately targeted what they had identified as "moderate and reasonable" sections of the shop-floor.⁵⁹

By the time the BJUAC had launched their campaign, a sizeable group of disillusioned millmen had already expressed a desire to leave. They were only persuaded to fight

⁵⁶ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, p. 35.

⁵⁷ Oral testimony from R. Allen and L. Allen, recorded 15 October 2014, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

⁵⁸ Oral testimony from P. Winmill recorded 16 March 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

⁵⁹ BSC, *Bilston Review*, June 1980, MRC, MSS.365/BSC/56.

on after a full-time ISTC official erroneously warned that Government budget cuts would prompt management to offer heavily reduced redundancy terms:

I indicated to the members that there was now a changed situation, and also a changed Government, which could subsequently mean that such settlements would be far more difficult than they had previously been, and that perhaps the results would not be as favourable as previously had been the case.⁶⁰

Regardless of any such subterfuge, the men only agreed to contest the closure decision if satisfactory payments could not be secured. With this mindset, it was inevitable the mills campaign would fall at the very first hurdle.

The SWWC

The Road to Viability handed the responsibility of preparing all post steel regeneration schemes to BSC Industry. In the case of Bilston, industry officials had seemingly failed to produce any such plan. With little sign of progress, WMBC's Economic Development Committee, chaired by Dennis Turner, was forced to register a formal complaint with Whitehall. This prompted BSC Industry chief Peter Hardwick to sponsor a £50,000 geological survey of the site. At a March 1980 press conference, he revealed a proposal to develop the land for a cluster of factories, warehouses, commercial and residential properties aimed at attracting 2,700 new jobs to the town.⁶¹ However, at a subsequent Q&A session, Hardwick revealed that neither the

⁶⁰ Letter from R. Bishop to W. Sirs, 30 June 1980, MRC, MSS.36/2000/260.

⁶¹ *The Express and Star*, 4 March 1980.

Government nor BSC were willing to provide the estimated £4.2m required to deliver the project.⁶²

Civic leaders were left with little choice but to explore avenues for securing private investment, with Turner and some of his fellow Bilston Labour Party Councillors mounting an application for Enterprise Zone status. If approved, the scheme may have facilitated at least a partial rebirth of Bilston by permitting the relaxation of planning regulations and providing both tax concessions and rate reductions to potential investors. To generate support for the initiative, a joint public consultation and business conference was organised inside Bilston Town Hall. After a round of political lobbying, the Government rejected the application in favour of neighbouring Dudley, a town that had also recently lost its steelworks at Round Oak. Ever the pragmatist, Turner responded by working alongside Economic Development Committee officials to shake-up the authority's rates system, prompting the sale of the first pockets of land to developers in July 1980.

Then, following years of inactivity caused by a worsening recession, Bilston received a boost when Tarmac Group, a company originally co-founded by Alfred Hickman, purchased huge tracts of the 190-acre site to erect a business park and affordable social housing. An enthusiastic Turner described the potential impact regeneration could have had on the wider community:

⁶² BSC Industry, which didn't even have an office in the Midlands, admitted their limited resources would be concentrated on communities in Shotton, Port Talbot and Llanwern. Nevertheless, even in areas of high importance, the Corporation subsidiary failed to provide significant employment opportunities, leading one political scientist to describe its national post-steel regeneration policy as a "strategy of hope". See Young, *National Steel Strategy*, p. 369.

The psychological value of such a development with its attendant boost to the local economy in jobs and goods and service would be tremendous uplift in the community's morale. New housing and new businesses would be far, far more benefit for Bilston ... than years of dereliction.⁶³

However, Bilston would once again fall victim to the whims of a public sector industry. Having reviewed the BSC Industry's geological survey, coal industry officials expressed an interest in excavating an estimated £14m of coal sitting beneath the abandoned land. Council leaders, nevertheless, rejected the NCB's overtures, raising concerns over the impact the project would have on their plans to regenerate the site, "It is time we said that we will not be messed about by another nationalised industry grubbing up a few measly tons of coal at the expense of the people".⁶⁴ Ignoring the protests, the NCB appealed to the Government to ringfence the land. With customary zeal, Turner organised a community campaign that forced Environment Secretary, Nicolas Ridley, to order a public inquiry:

Bilston wants open-cast mining like a gunshot in the head. If a vote was taken among local families it would come out at 99.9 per cent against ... Given a choice, the people of Bilston would prefer the steel works back rather [than] open-casting or new housing development. They were prepared to put up with the environmental problems caused by the works because of the jobs provided and the £25m-a-year injection into the local economy ... Open

⁶³ *The Express and Star*, 18 September 1985.

⁶⁴ *The Express and Star*, 20 September 1984.

casting would bring problems of dust, noise and traffic congestion, but the people of the area would get nothing out of it apart from a few short-term jobs. What we want now is a new hope and we believe that housing development-led investment will bring back jobs.⁶⁵

Following a protracted public investigation, during which Turner took centre stage, the Government permitted the NCB to press ahead with their plans, postponing the regeneration of Bilston for several years.⁶⁶

The town's steelmen, meanwhile, struggled with life outside the plant. The principal feeling was one of heartache, with Bilston's resident poet writing a threnody capturing the sombre mood that had taken hold:

*The factory gates are closing,
Machines are quiet and still
No roaring of the furnaces
No rolling of the mill.
The men fought hard to keep it open
But all odds were against their will
It was a world-wide recession
And this was a bitter pill...*⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *The Express and Star*, 17 May 1986.

⁶⁶ In June 1991, twelve years after the cessation of steelmaking, Tarmac was given permission to develop the derelict site. As well as building one million feet of warehousing, the £100m project provided 25 acres of land for housing, a leisure centre and secondary school, making it the largest development scheme in Birmingham-Black Country conurbation.

⁶⁷ *Man and Metal*, June 1979.

The trauma was not limited to ex-workers, with one local resident conveying her anger to the editor of *The Express and Star*:

I wonder what lesson the young people of Bilston and surrounding areas are learning these days? Is it that you should be hard-working, fair to your employer and fellow workers, loyal and conscientious while receiving in return a good wage and the same fairness and loyalty from your employer? Of course not! Those are the ideals which made their fathers redundant, even though they had never been on strike and the work was making a profit.⁶⁸

Local business leaders, responding to the JURUE report, were concerned over the future of the market town, with local butcher Ann Hodges warning, “Bilston will die because of this”.⁶⁹ Such prophecies didn’t immediately come to fruition, as former steelworkers’ spending power was initially enhanced by record-breaking redundancy cheques. Assessing the local employment scene, BSC statistics suggests that, of the 1,740 steelmen axed in April 1979, only 366 remained jobless twelve months later.⁷⁰

This data, however, was skewed by the 400 or so men enrolled in temporary retraining courses, and a similar number employed on short-time hours. By September 1980, 6,500 Wulfrunians were working a three-day week under the Government’s Temporary

⁶⁸ *The Express and Star*, 20 April 1979.

⁶⁹ *The Express and Star*, 19 April 1979.

⁷⁰ BSC, *Bilston Review*, June 1980, MRC, MSS.365/BSC/56.

Short-Time Compensation Scheme. Tom Larkin, a local Councillor and close friend of the Turner brothers, described the situation on the ground:

It isn't only the unemployment figures we ought to be concerned about, it is also the numbers that are on short time. People on short time lose out both ways as they lose benefits and get only part wages. Nobody talks about the hidden figures above the two million and families that are struggling to make ends meet.⁷¹

One such worker was Cecil Baines. Despite originally securing full-time employment as a steel stockholder, he was soon placed on reduced hours before falling victim to his new employer's 'first-in, first-out' policy. Experiencing two redundancies in the space of twelve painful months, the skilled metalworker struggled with life away from steel:

I felt very depressed – I'd started to learn a new job and had begun to hope for a job to see me through to retirement. Now there are even more men looking for even fewer jobs ... Whereas I should be heading for my twilight years free from money worries, the worries are there. It's going to be a struggle to keep going.⁷²

Baines' ex-colleagues in the mills, some of whom entered the jobs market in September 1980, faced an even bleaker situation. With many of these men over 55

⁷¹ *Wolverhampton Community Press*, October 1980.

⁷² *Wolverhampton Community Press*, November 1980.

years-old, they quickly discovered that both their age and industry-specific skills acted as a barrier to finding meaningful work. Three months after leaving the industry, John Parnum complained:

If I had been given £15,000 redundancy money, I would give it all back tomorrow if I could keep my job ... I'm 58 and I always tell people my age straight away when I apply for a job. They are not interested, and you can understand that – I even applied for a janitor's job and couldn't get that.⁷³

One young steelman remembers being concerned about the plight of his senior ex-colleagues:

For some of the guys it was the end of their future ... there was people who wouldn't get jobs because they were probably too old. You know, there were guys who were 64 ... they couldn't get another job again, it was impossible. For one, they were too frail and, two, they were too old.⁷⁴

The rundown of the mills coincided with another crippling recession.

Now we're starting to get concerned about where we were going to get jobs. You could hear rumblings that John Thompson's was having problems as well, Sankeys was struggling, Rubery Owens was gone. So, a lot of the big companies were starting to go through the same wall! ... you could see, you

⁷³ *The Birmingham Post*, 18 December 1980.

⁷⁴ Oral testimony from P. Winmill recorded 16 March 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

could see that the industry was going to go. I remember waking up two or three times in the night, sweating and thinking, 'Christ, I've lost my job!' ... I felt really unhappy about it. I felt as if they were ripping the life out of the industry, our area, especially Bilston and Wolverhampton. A lot of the companies were beginning to struggle big style and you're starting to wonder, 'where am I going to get a job'? You've got families, mortgages, all the things most people worry about and it was becoming a bigger part of your life, almost by the day. It got to the point where you could see on the horizon there was a big precipice and you're going over it. So, it was obviously worrying everyone.⁷⁵

In August 1980, Patent Shaft steelworks in neighbouring Wednesbury released a further 1,500 steelmen into the jobs market. A month later, the local unemployment rate grew to an astonishing 17.7 per cent as several of Wolverhampton's largest employers rationalised operations.⁷⁶ With the former workshop of the world becoming an employment blackspot, one Job Centre official voiced his concerns to the press:

It's frightening. In November 1977 we had 1,080 unemployed and now the total is 2,689. We have 28 vacancies and none of them are in the manufacturing industry ... It is worse than anywhere else in the region apart from Shropshire, where work has always been hard to find. Unless we get

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ The Bilston Group, a community organisation led by Reg Turley, estimated that between 1976 and 1980 approximately 5,200 jobs were lost in Bilston alone. See *Wolverhampton Community Press*, September 1980.

some new industry into Bilston, the prospects are extremely bleak. It's a dying town.⁷⁷

In October 1980 Bilston experienced another setback when Elisabeth was dismantled by the Corporation. Hundreds of ex-steelmen flocked to Millfields Road to witness the final moments of their beloved Lizzie. The decision to demolish the 'Grand Old Lady' precipitated yet another wave of despair, with one grief-stricken resident lamenting the loss of two centuries of ironmaking tradition:

Sunday, October 5, was surely a day which marked the end of Bilston – the day on which the grand and stately Elisabeth finally submitted to the so-called march of progress, and sank gracefully to the ground. As residents of Millfields Road we often had cause [sic] to complain of the dirt, noise and smoke which came from British Steel and other heavy industry in the vicinity – but in hindsight all that was preferable to the unnatural silence which now prevails. For the noise and bustle were synonymous with full employment and prosperity – and of generations of families who were proud of their skills and loyalty to the companies they worked for. Companies such as British Steel, John Thompsons, Sankeys – names which are now rapidly becoming merely part of the history of Bilston. What price now that loyalty and skill, Mrs Thatcher and Mr Callaghan? Will Bilston, like the Phoenix, ever rise from the ashes and become again that thriving, bustling industrial market town we knew

⁷⁷ *The Birmingham Post*, 18 December 1980.

and loved? Rest in peace Elisabeth. We shall miss you and that you stood for.⁷⁸

The demolition of Elisabeth proved a tremendous psychological blow for Bilston's ex-steelmen. Roger Deans, working as a boundary patrol officer on that fateful day, remembers seeing the blast furnace laying in a smouldering heap:

It was an amazing sight, but it was a sight that nobody wanted to see, ever. It had been there all my life ... and it was the skyline – whenever you came down the New Road, there was Elisabeth, and it was an awful day. When I say awful – it was a pleasant enough day, but it was awful to see that go down, and you think, how can you get attached to a damn great [thing] like that. But people did, and it was extremely sad ... And I walked up with a chap and we walked round the corner of the shell plant, and that was the first time we saw the furnace lying down, and he said to me, this is the end of Bilston as we know it, and it was. And he was virtually in tears, I couldn't believe it ...⁷⁹

For some, the disappearance of Lizzie represented the loss of Bilston's identity and, moreover, its sense of place:

It killed it. When they shut Stewart and Lloyds, it killed the heart of Bilston. Because Bilston was a steeltown.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ *The Express and Star*, 9 October 1980.

⁷⁹ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, pp. 43-44.

⁸⁰ Oral testimony from M. Birch, recorded 15 October 2014, ITSOF, BCA1/0.

Well, Bilston, as a town has a lot of history and it was always known as a working man's town ... very much steeped in industry ... everywhere you looked, all these jobs were going ... You could actually see that people were concerned about what it would do to the town, and you could hear people saying, 'It will kill Bilston, it will kill it'. And it did, but it took a while. It didn't happen right away, because obviously people had lots of money, so they were spending it for the first 6 to 12 months. But the next year after that you saw it go right to the dogs and, to be truthful, I remember saying this to the wife ... 'Don't the people look down'. You know, their shoulders were down, and the people looked as though they were lost, and the whole place looked like it.⁸¹

Reg Turley was concerned about the impact this was having on the mental health of his ex-colleagues:

BRITISH STEEL rightly or wrongly decided to cease operation – Iron making – Steel making and Rolling at its Bilston Works in May 1979, the affect [sic] of this decision had a catastrophic effect on the people of Bilston and its near neighbours. After the elapse of 18 months these effects are just beginning to assert themselves, there is a deep sense of injustice or 'why should it happen to us'. It is no use 'faceless people' in authority saying 'you must move to where jobs are' or 'you must change to new conditions and take on different trades'. Men and children of the Bilston area have inherent in them the feeling that working in heavy industries is their natural 'bent' and a great deal of

⁸¹ Oral testimony from P. Winmill recorded 16 March 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

satisfaction is thus engendered. Take this driving force away and life becomes meaningless. Whole families are now feeling desperate and the future seems futile. Who knows the anger, the utter feeling of hopelessness, the bitterness of men who worked in a worthwhile trade contributing to the national wealth who are now unemployed, no prospects for jobs commensurate with their skills and ability. Who indeed, knows what affect this is having on themselves and their families. What disruption is caused in family life when that should be the one stable factor in an ever-changing world.⁸²

A valuable insight into the impact unemployment had had on domestic life was provided by another ex-steelman:

I'm starting to get short tempered with the wife and kids. It takes me up to an hour to fetch a newspaper. I just have to get out of the house. When I was at work I would come home and have a meal and talk about the day at work, and my wife would talk about her day – now out [*sic*] conversations are over in five minutes and I get short tempered. My savings have gone now and I'm having to live off state benefits. I'm worried about the future.⁸³

A quiet pride, linked to being part of a highly skilled, strategically vital public sector primary industry, was substituted with the indignity of idleness. The wife of one unemployed steelman remembers the embarrassment of joining the dole queue for the first time:

⁸² *Wolverhampton Community Press*, November 1980.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

I must admit that claiming benefits was probably one of the most degrading things I've ever had to do because they asked me so many personal questions and they treated my husband like he was worthless ... They [BSC] destroyed a community. It just destroyed everything, and I don't think they realised how much it would affect people. It left a mark.⁸⁴

An emotional Graham Howe, meanwhile, reflects on how closure impacted him both psychologically and physically:

At the end of the day, when we lost, actually, it's the closest I've been to a nervous breakdown. I ended up with shingles. I'd put that much into it, you know, the small group of us – we went everywhere together ... It did me ... A couple of my members, T&G members, one lad committed suicide not long after it shut ... You know, people had worked there all their lives, their dads had worked there.⁸⁵

Some were ashamed of the stigma of long-term unemployment:

... it was very [emotional] because the [majority of workers] felt passionately about [the strength of our case], then, when all that had been lost, and of course we saw the aftermath of that; there was a lot of tragedy, really, a [great deal] of sadness, because some people never got a job after that, in their lives.

⁸⁴ Oral testimony from L. Allen, recorded 12 August 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

⁸⁵ Oral testimony from G. Howe recorded 25 January 2015, ITSOE, BCA1/0.

Some people just couldn't come to terms with losing their jobs, they used to go off. I remember one chap, he used to start out every day, at the same time, on his bike, food in his bag, and just ride around because he didn't want his neighbours to know that he'd lost his job. There were all kinds of cases at the time. But then we said, well, [these human reactions were bound to occur], the steel works had closed, everything had gone, 1980.⁸⁶

As a civic leader, Turner witnessed the human tragedy unfolding before him first-hand. Following closure, the Councillor sought to create a forum from which he could tend to the needs of unemployed workers and their families. In March 1981, Turner and some of his former BJUAC colleagues were handed an opportunity to secure a familiar facility. With the regeneration of the ex-works site postponed, BSC Industry was looking for a new custodian of the now abandoned social centre or club. After forming a workers' welfare co-operative, the Bilston men re-established the building as a public entity, drop-in centre and social club, thus beginning a new chapter in their Chairman's community and political activism.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, p. 20.

⁸⁷ The decision to reform as a co-operative, and not a private limited company, was inspired by a desire to establish the new organisation as an entirely altruistic concern with a responsibility to the entire community. It was driven by new SWWC Chairman Dennis Turner who, like his mentor, was a passionate advocate of the cooperative movement. It is telling that he would later stand as a Labour and Co-operative Party candidate at general elections. Once in office, the MP sought to advance the movement even further, chairing the Parliamentary Co-operative Group and making key contributions to the Party's annual conferences.

As well as filling the cultural void left by the winding up of the plant's many recreational or sporting societies, the centre provided a space from which Turner could nurture what he was now enthusiastically labelling "community socialism":⁸⁸

For our own, and our children's, future we must now begin the campaign for a different order of society, where the maintenance of full employment and its due rewards cannot fail us! Where production is planned for need, not greed! Where community life is about caring for each other, particularly for those less fortunate than ourselves! The choice is yours – mean, selfish Conservatism, or caring, community Socialism! I care, I believe you do too.⁸⁹

An open-door policy saw the club function as a sanctuary for Bilstonians suffering from the social isolation triggered by mass, long-term unemployment and the Conservative Government's ongoing austerity programme. Addressing the needs of jobless workers and their dependents, Turner and his fellow co-operators joined various community groups, charities and the local authorities in administering vital frontline social services.

Through their community work, the Bilston men became increasingly concerned by the growing issue of youth unemployment, which had been compounded by the

⁸⁸ The welfare society had met the cultural and recreational needs of steelworkers and the wider community for nearly half a century. Under the SWWC, the site's two bowling greens, cricket field, football pitch and tennis courts were open to members, with the centre housing approximately 50 clubs or societies. Events such as afternoon tea dances, bingo and big band nights proved particularly popular. All local unemployed workers and their families could access the facilities for no charge.

⁸⁹ D. Turner, *Travel our Way*, 7 May 1981, WCA, DX/203/10.

termination of several local apprenticeship schemes.⁹⁰ In 1982 they worked alongside MSC and WMBC to establish the NSTS in the former works training centre. An original intake of young adults enrolled on one-year YOP courses in clerical work, retail, horticulture, catering, fashion and construction.⁹¹ The project proved an unrivalled success, winning several prestigious awards before being granted Approved Training Organisation status by the MSC. At the heart of the NSTC model was a flexible admissions policy that removed any potential barriers to entry.⁹²

Turner's experiences as a co-operator and training provider inspired him to become a vocal advocate for the self-advancement of working-class communities through free, open access post-16 education. As the Chairman of WMBC's Further Education Committee, he looked to expand boroughwide adult vocational training provision. In 1983, the Council commissioned Paul Willis, a renowned sociologist, to undertake ground-breaking ethnographic research into local unemployment.⁹³ The study, which recommended a complete overhaul of existing post-16 training, prompted WMBC to revamp Wolverhampton's entire further education strategy. This culminated in the opening of BCC in September 1984. Launched with an initial cohort of 5,000 students, it provided a range of innovative vocational and academic courses. With Turner on its

⁹⁰ George Barnsby calculated between 1978 and 1985 industrial apprenticeship places fell by 70 per cent in Wolverhampton. See Barnsby, *A History of*, p. 84.

⁹¹ Bilston's 'Yoppies' undertook six months of class-based theory, followed by an extended placement in local industry. By the second academic year the centre had increased its annual intake to 140 students, over half of which were long-term unemployed. The training centre was expanded, with an urban farm, greenhouse and orchard installed on ex-steelworks land.

⁹² The SWWC also worked alongside NACRO to re-train ex-offenders, whilst specifically targeting members of the BAME community and those with special learning needs.

⁹³ P. Willis, *The Youth Review: Social Conditions of Young People in Wolverhampton* (Aldershot, 1988).

Board of Governors, the college offered free tertiary education programmes to all, regardless of age, social class, race or religion:

The College was to have its primary objective reaching out into the community to provide education and training for those previously denied it. The word Community in the title is no accident but the result of deliberate decision to indicate a community focus taken by the Education Committee ...⁹⁴

Turner personally handpicked radical educational theorist and proud socialist Keith Wymer for the role of Principal. Under the pair's leadership, the facility grew into one of the largest education providers of its kind in the UK, eventually assisting 50,000 adult learners to realise their potential.⁹⁵ Reflecting on the achievements of the NSTC and BCC, Turner would later celebrate the role adult education plays in assisting working-class communities break free from the shackles of poverty:

These youngsters are often born into disadvantaged and dysfunctional families, but parents, single mothers, single fathers, carers and grandparents are all welcomed and encouraged to integrate into the learning, caring and education process, where healthcare, hygiene, debt, financial planning and many other important practical issues for the family are discussed. The confidence and well-being which this intervention and interaction engenders is having a profoundly beneficial effect on the early lives of hundreds of

⁹⁴ Bilston Community College, *100 Years on* (Wolverhampton, 1996), p. 38.

⁹⁵ *The Independent*, 15 July 2009. BCC specialised in providing foundation courses, enabling Bilstonians and Wulfrunians of all backgrounds to access university-level education.

thousands of our young children, whose life chances are daily being transformed. Education, at every stage of development, imbues empowerment in the individual, the family and the community, transforming lives with knowledge, and opening up opportunities for economic and social advancement. Therein rests the real challenge of combating poverty through improving life chances.⁹⁶

The failure of the mills campaign could have signalled the final disbandment of the action committee but, as community leaders, its members became progressively more concerned about the fates of the town's inhabitants. The work of the SWWC brought to light some of the worst excesses of the Conservative Government, further elevating a collective political consciousness that had already been piqued by the decade-long defence campaign and the ensuing steel strike.

The Politics of Dennis Turner

Following the establishment of the SWWC, Dennis Turner took the opportunity to launch his bid for re-election to the WMBC and the WMCC. The campaign, managed by his brother and fellow co-operator, Bert, targeted his political nemeses and was run on an anti-austerity ticket:

Since the previous election in 1977, the changes which have taken place for us locally and nationally have been both distressing and disastrous. The election of a Tory County Council in 1977, with their miserly, doctrinaire,

⁹⁶ Parl. Deb. H.L. (5th ser.) (2008) cols. 733-36.

obsession for massive bus fare increases, cuts in services, coupled with their obvious inability to make any positive impact on the problems of the West Midlands economy is their languid legacy to us for their four years of political control. In 1979 we were further 'assisted' in terms of jobs – standard of living – inflation etc. by the advent of a Conservative Government in Britain under Mrs. Thatcher, which has, in my opinion, been a total unmitigated disaster for working people (or should I say non-working people) and their families. It must be true that every person reading this must know someone whose employment has been adversely affected by the policies of this Tory Government! It is now time that YOUR voice was heard in repudiating what Thatcherism and Toryism stands for!⁹⁷

The experience of unemployment – combined with the brutal realities of Thatcherism – appears to have reawakened the activist in Turner. Over the proceeding weeks, he was witnessed heckling the Prime Minister as she visited a Wolverhampton hat shop and, whilst protesting NHS cuts outside No.10 Downing Street, he would organise a demonstration led by a sick child from his Springvale Ward.

The centre soon became a hive of political activism, with one local CPGB member describing it as the “social and political hub” of Bilston and Wolverhampton, where, “members of the South East Constituency Labour Party, councillors and hangers on would meet over a pint, engage in congenial conversation, and let their hair down”.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ D. Turner, *Travel our Way*, 7 May 1981, WCA, DX/203/10.

⁹⁸ Reeves and Chevannes, *Real Labour*, p. 67.

To Turner and his supporters, the club functioned as an advanced political training school; a safe haven where activists could exchange ideas and information.

The co-operator thereby placed himself at the forefront of a grassroots 'right to work' movement dedicated to protesting long-term mass unemployment. In May 1981 he joined former campaign supporters, the WB&DTUC, in coordinating the Black Country leg of the People's March for Jobs.⁹⁹ After a huge rally in Wolverhampton that featured speeches from Tony Benn and Bob Edwards, Turner led a procession of protestors back to Bilston. Joined by hundreds of local workers participating in pre-arranged walkouts, the demonstrators followed him to the former melting shop site. There, they were joined by a local bishop, who oversaw a mock funeral service ending with the burial of a small coffin containing the final piece of Bilston steel.¹⁰⁰

Between 1981 and 1986, as the industrial base of the Black Country retracted even further, Turner continued to champion the cause of jobless workers. In August 1982 he joined a coalition of West Midlands TUC affiliated groups in organising the People's Campaign for Jobs.¹⁰¹ A three-day protest culminated in a 'Festival of the Unemployed' in Birmingham; featuring a performance from a people's theatre that the busy local Government official had helped co-found. He also backed protests against public service cuts, whilst lending his substantial organising experience to men employed at struggling Black Country firms.

⁹⁹ The Bilston men had first met the campaign organisers at the September 1978 Day of Action, with the Liverpoolians stopping off in Wolverhampton *en route* to London.

¹⁰⁰ Following a minute's silence, the group made their way to the club to enjoy a charity event featuring music from Liverpool protest group The Spinners. A fortnight later, the SWWC and their supporters joined their comrades on the final leg of their journey to London.

¹⁰¹ *The ISTC Banner*, August 1982.

The co-operators' public and political profiles soon grew, with Bert Turner elected as a Councillor and eventually Mayor of Wolverhampton. His brother was destined for even greater things. By now a key player in the West Midlands labour movement, in June 1987 he replaced Bob Edwards as MP for Wolverhampton South East. Running as a Labour and Co-operative Party candidate on a socialist ticket, Turner secured 48.9 per cent of the vote, surpassing his mentor's majority by a significant margin. He announced his arrival on the national political scene with an impassioned maiden speech that focused on an issue that had come to dominate his life:

Many of my Black Country men would not comprehend what has been said in the speeches over the past few days, I think they would have difficulty in identifying some of the things that have been said by the Government about the community in which we live in the Black Country today. Unemployment is 25 per cent in my constituency. In Wolverhampton, 25,000 good men and women do not have the opportunity to make a useful contribution to society and cannot receive the rewards that would arise from that. When we talk of unemployment, we must take into account the indignity that comes with it. Independence and freedom have been mentioned often in the past few days. The people whom I represent no longer have the freedom and independence given by the wage packet. A wage packet is important to them, and their dignity, standards and independence are based on that. So, I must reconcile that freedom and independence with the difficulties and impoverishment in which many of our

people have been placed by being out of work and finding it difficult to cope in present circumstances.¹⁰²

This powerful address set the tone for the remainder of his time in Westminster. Over the next two decades, Turner became the flagbearer for worker-led anti-closure campaigns at struggling industrial firms.¹⁰³ Meanwhile, retaining his Confederation membership, he also spoke out against Conservative Government attacks on his beloved trade union movement:

First, it is appropriate that I should declare my membership of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, from which I receive no sponsorship. I am proud to be associated with that union, as a member, because of the skills and talents of its work force in the steel industry. We know that that industry has recently been devastated by the further loss of many jobs ... The trade union movement in Britain has actively represented the aspirations of working people for longer than the inaptly termed 'modern' Conservative party has governed. Trade unionism still remains a central pillar of a democratic society such as ours. Trade unions have been attacked and undermined by this reactionary, Conservative Government in the 1980s, who would continue such attacks in the 1990s if they had their way. But the Government will not have their way.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² 118 Parl. Deb. H.C. (6th ser.) (1987) cols. 698-99.

¹⁰³ These included campaigns at Cannon Industries, Samuel Edges, John Thompsons and Rover Longbridge.

¹⁰⁴ 204 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1992) col. 246.

As an opposition backbencher, he influenced Tory policy by forming a cross-party Parliamentary Group for Further Education, which he chaired for fifteen years. Within his own party, the popular MP was handed the whips for both Further Education and the West Midlands.

Back in Bilston, Turner was tireless in his constituency work, often holding impromptu surgeries on market day or in the backroom of the club. Achieving 56.7 per cent of the overall vote in April 1992, this figure increased to 63.7 per cent five years later, and a record-breaking 67.4 per cent in June 2001. His support base included hundreds of ex-colleagues, including many from the BAME community:

I got them to sign up *en masse* for the ISTC. Years later, when I stood for parliament, and I was out canvassing in Ettingshall, they would come to the door and say: 'I know you. You used to stand on the table in the [works] canteen'.¹⁰⁵

With the May 1997 election victory secured, Turner anticipated an invite from Prime Minister Tony Blair to join his New Labour Government. However, like so many of the party's traditional working-class socialist MPs, he found himself side-lined at the expense of ambitious younger Blairites. With his whips unceremoniously withdrawn, he was handed the minor role of Parliamentary Secretary to new Minister for International Development and fellow West Midlander Clare Short. Disregarding any personal disappointment, Turner threw himself into his job with customary enthusiasm,

¹⁰⁵ Reeves and Chevannes, *Real Labour*, p. 37.

formulating his department's core policy objectives of achieving social equality, ending poverty and improving education standards in some of the world's poorest nations.

Behind closed doors, Turner and his Minister became increasingly uncomfortable with many of the policies being pursued by their Government; particularly those relating to the introduction of university fees and academy schools, which contradicted their longstanding political principles. But, unlike Short, who eventually resigned over the invasion of Iraq, Turner wouldn't abandon his beloved Labour Party. In refusing to vote down his Government, he was merely demonstrating those traits he had displayed as a campaign leader and trade unionist. Reflecting on the role the Labour Government played in the plant's downfall, he was customarily diplomatic, "Ministers were asking questions, although I must say that I'd have expected something more positive from some of our Ministers – I won't mention names; I know them very well now".¹⁰⁶ Away from Westminster, he faced criticism for ignoring calls to oppose the war. Such party loyalty also led to a public squabble with local left-wing organisations, including members of the WB&DTUC.

Turner's fidelity was eventually rewarded by his party leadership, with Blair making him a Lord after he agreed to stepdown at the May 2005 election. As a working peer, he continued to speak out on matters relating to the issues that had driven his career as a community leader, political activist, local Government official, trade unionist and MP. In May 2008, for example, Turner reflected on his own experiences of unemployment when instigating a debate on poverty:

¹⁰⁶ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, pp. 11-12.

The mass unemployment of the 1980s remains indelibly etched in my mind. I was one of the 3 million unemployed at the time. Our Bilston steel works was closed with the loss of 2,300 jobs. Factory after factory went out of existence, and 40 per cent of the Black Country's manufacturing base was wiped away. Levels of unemployment ran at 30 per cent, and in some streets it was as high as 50 per cent. Some 35 per cent of our young people were denied their first opportunity of employment since leaving school. Training places were almost non-existent, and the careers service was moribund. A depressing sense of hopelessness and despair pervaded our whole community. Soon poverty made its degrading presence felt, and for many human beings, life chances were abruptly truncated at a crucial stage in their lives. Sadly, for others, their life chances ebbed away at the moment of their worklessness, never again to return.¹⁰⁷

The ex-steelworker ended his impassioned address by outlining a personal manifesto he suggested would realise his life goal of social and economic equality:

At the top of my agenda for tackling poverty and improving life chances is the opportunity for employment. In our society, the independence and freedom that a wage packet or salary cheque bestows can liberate the spirit and engender confidence, self-worth and a sense of well-being for the individual and his family. Conversely, unemployment destroys a human being's sense of dignity and pride, creates a climate of uncertainty and financial turmoil, and generates a poverty of the spirit which denies ambition and aspiration ... The

¹⁰⁷ Parl. Deb. H.L. (5th ser.) (2008) col. 733.

virtuous link of full employment in the pursuit of tackling poverty and improving life chances together with the achievement of increasing national prosperity is an economic and social justice model that should bind us all.¹⁰⁸

The May 2008 address was followed with a decision by Turner and the surviving SWWC members to sell the club and training centre to the Midlands Co-operative Society. At this stage, ill-health and old age had taken their toll, with their Chairman suffering a debilitating stroke. Two years after his death in February 2014, the club was finally torn down.

Conclusion

The threat to the long-term future of public sector steel, triggered by the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government, impelled a rejuvenated Confederation leadership to openly challenge management prerogative over policymaking via *The ISTC Banner* and a *New Deal for Steel*. The subsequent risk to the hallowed Big Five prompted the TUCSICC organisations, who had discarded longstanding rivalries during the historic national steel strike, to finally take concerted collective action. The extraordinary 'Steel Appeal' protest centred on a sophisticated and multifaceted lobbying campaign that emphasises the importance Congress House assigned to their hallowed bulk, commercial steelworks. The manner in which the unions defended the Big Five may have frustrated Bilston's former steelmen, yet it was entirely in accordance with their long-term national defence strategy as per the April 1973 national resolution.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Although the campaign successfully safeguarded the Cathedrals-by-the-sea, it all came too late for Bilston's millmen. Like their heavy-end colleagues, they succumb to a cynical management team armed with the golden handshake. Defeated, redundant steelworkers and their families faced the harsh reality of living in one of the UK's biggest economic blackspots. They would, nevertheless, receive support from a familiar source. The strike and, moreover, the domestic policies pursued by Thatcher, further elevated the former BJUAC leaders' collective social and political consciences. Concerned by the well-being of their fellow Bilstonians, Dennis Turner began a new chapter in his community and political activism. Establishing a workers' welfare cooperative inside the abandoned works social centre, he delivered an array of vital frontline services and community projects under the guise of 'community socialism'; eventually assisting with the self-advancement of the jobless through tertiary education and vocational training initiatives.

As well as functioning as a sanctuary for those suffering from the social isolation and poverty caused by long-term unemployment, the centre provided a forum in which the SWWC chair and his supporters could continue their unique brand of political activism. Exploiting the various organising and lobbying skills he had developed over the previous decade, Turner assisted several regional grassroots anti-closure campaigns. With his public profile magnified, the former steelworker entered the national political arena, with his twenty-five years in Westminster clearly defined by his time as an activist, defence campaign leader and co-operator. The achievements of Dennis and the SWWC throughout the post-steel period, are a fitting legacy to the battle for Bilston steelworks.

Conclusion:

The Battle for Bilston in Retrospect:

This thesis has traced the main political events that contributed to the battle of Bilston, documenting how the actions of the state impinged on public sector steel. The industrial strategies of five different administrations and the impact they had on both management and rank and file workers at Bilston have been appraised in some detail.

For all its endeavours on the social policy front, Harold Wilson's Government made the fundamental mistake of yielding to BSC's supposed technical and commercial expertise. By failing to cross-examine the overall judgement of management, they watched on as Grosvenor Place repeatedly failed to exploit favourable trading conditions in the late 1960s. Wilson also sanctioned the Heritage Plan, which gently ushered in the ill-fated relocation of the industry and the systematic marginalisation of profitable facilities like Bilston.

Labelled a "sad shambles" by Keith Laybourn, Edward Heath's industrial strategy further undermined the facility's long-term prospects.¹ Firstly, by expediting BSC's fledgling rationalisation programme in March 1971, the Conservatives set a precedent of forlornly seeking to improve performance primarily through expediting compulsory de-manning initiatives and plant closures. Secondly, despite conducting a disruptive investigation into the industry's long-term development plans, Heath's ministry also failed to scrutinise the rationale behind management's erroneous 'bigger is better'

¹ Laybourn, *A History*, p. 197.

approach; instead distracting itself with concerns over theoretical capacity and cost projections. Thirdly, they replaced the socially conscientious Lord Julian Melchett with the architect of Bilston's downfall Sir Monty 'Finish 'em' Finniston. Although Heath's time in Government was fleeting, the implications of his industrial strategy were not.

Wilson's second term in office was a lamentable tale of missed opportunities. Centring on the well-intentioned Beswick Review, its contradictory steel policy signalled a political compromise that failed to realise its manifesto pledge to support long-established steel communities. The state-sponsored investigation, described by Charles Docherty as a "cosmetic exercise", made absolutely no attempt to address the many inherent flaws of the previous administration's development model.² The Labour Government should have scrutinised the commercial decision to abandon overperforming mini-works. But, by instead focusing exclusively on the social implications of their predecessor's White Paper, they merely handed a temporary stay of execution to Bilston – a profitable facility that should have been incorporated into the industry's long-term operating plan. Following Beswick, advanced plant closures returned to the national agenda with the arrival of the steel crisis. Although Labour Ministers assisted threatened workers by instructing the Corporation to abandon its April 1975 de-manning proposal, they thereafter obliged the further rundown of Bilston by encouraging the unions to negotiate damaging productivity deals.

James Callaghan's Prime Ministership at first provided a respite for the industry and its long-suffering workforce. An upturn in demand was complimented by several state-sponsored support mechanisms and the recruitment of an ostensibly more

² Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 130.

commercially minded and conciliatory industry chief. Bilston's diligent steelmen were rewarded by being absorbed into Grosvenor Place's updated medium-term operating plan for a third time. This would all change with the re-emergence of the world slump. Under intense political and press scrutiny, the crisis ridden Government responded to managerial pressure by abandoning its moral obligation to older sites. Indeed, the Road to Viability provided the Labour Party with another opportunity to reassess the basis of all future development. However, by consenting to management's perfidious overcapacity/overmanning argument, the White Paper authorised a cycle of closures that would go way beyond Beswick. This reactive steel policy not only ended any prospect of Bilston receiving lifesaving investment, but the introduction of generous redundancy packages would eventually undermine local resistance.

Elected only days after iron and steelmaking in the Black Country ended, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government had a considerable impact on the political and social landscapes of post-industrial Bilston. Having forced the steel strike and the closure of the mills, the Tories' attack on public services further politicised key members of the defunct BJUAC. Although, as experienced activists, they were conceivably always destined to re-engage in civic life, the Government's determination to undermine working-class communities inspired the establishment of the SWWC, the NSTS and a new, more intensive round in their political activism.

This study has, therefore, demonstrated how the experiences of industrial workers were impacted by the state during a prolonged period of economic and political retrenchment. Each of the Governments reviewed in this thesis placed too great a degree of faith in the competence of management, particularly in the field of future

planning. Although they all possessed executive powers, successive Ministers consistently endorsed BSC's 'bigger is better' philosophy, in spite of its many obvious shortcomings. In the words of one political scientist, when "the corporation proposes, the government disposes".³ Moreover, as the crisis unfolded, they were too easily convinced by Grosvenor Place's vague overcapacity/overmanning argument, with Bilston's steelmen paying the ultimate price.

The thesis has placed the battle for Bilston in its full industrial context: providing an economic, commercial and technical survey of the Corporation, whilst uncovering how decisions made at boardroom-level directly impacted the lives of domestic steelworkers and workplace cultures. It has revealed how the closure of a viable state enterprise, attended by hardworking and highly-skilled personnel, was encouraged by industry officials who had already overseen the loss of 68,000 employees by the time they unceremoniously sacked Bilston's 1,900 remaining heavy-end workers in April 1979.

The retrenchment of the public sector steel industry was the result of mismanagement on a massive scale. BSC's approach to long-term planning was both ill-designed and poorly superintended. By concentrating on inflexible mega sites that relied on full capacity working, planners wasted an astonishing £3.09bn of taxpayer's money on capital expenditure between July 1967 and April 1979. A dogged fixation with bulk steelmaking facilities left the industry badly exposed to the coming crisis, which was further compounded by a series of operational and commercial blunders. Scrutinising the responses of senior industry officials to the constantly shifting economic climate, it

³ Abromeit, *British Steel*, p. 208.

has been demonstrated how they frequently missed out on vital sales revenue, a factor that contributed to huge pre-tax losses. BSC, meanwhile, wantonly sacrificed a works that made a profit of £14.4m in the crisis years of 1974 to 1978. During this same period, the industry lost a staggering £682m, with the remainder of the Special Steels Division posting a £4.6m deficit. The Staffordshire knot most certainly propped up the Yorkshire rose.

Bilston's steelmen were forced to contend with senior industry leaders using management prerogative to rundown their workplace in three distinct stages. The first involved the systematic marginalisation of the facility from their modernising agenda. Overseeing a process of managed decline, they funnelled Bilston's profits into rival lossmaking special steel sites in South Yorkshire, whilst leaving the Black Country facility to wither on the vine. At the same time, an explicitly biased divisional management team oversaw a series of discriminatory trading policies that forced the facility into terminal decline. This stage, which saw personnel and orders confiscated by the Mount, would culminate in the permanent mothballing of Elisabeth; a move that was designed to safeguard unprofitable production units elsewhere. The elimination of Bilston's ability to produce its own hot metal amounted to industrial sabotage. Not only had management deliberately engineered a lossmaking situation on the ground, they also sought to forcibly undermine the anti-closure campaign before formal consultation could take place.

The mothballing of the cherished 'Big Lizzie' heralded the transition to a second, more formal phase in the rundown process. By exploiting well-meaning consultation machinery, senior industry officials deceived Bilston's moderate and conformist

workers into preparing two separate survival blueprints – despite already deciding to shut the plant regardless. Meanwhile, the Corporation looked to place further pressure on local workers by deliberately propagating their false overcapacity/overmanning narrative. Emboldened by the support of the state, decision-makers obstinately rejected legitimate and well-constructed proposals for lifesaving investment; instead seeking a negotiated closure.

Frustrated by the intensity of local resistance, management proceeded to the third and final stage. By moving to unilaterally reduce steelmaking operations, senior industry officials sought to create an embryonic closure situation by backdoor means. When these premeditated acts were thwarted at Scarborough and again by the plant takeover, management cynically diluted shop-floor solidarity. Engaging in more insidious acts, they used mouth-watering compensation packages to split the workforce into two warring camps. This process would be redeployed fifteen months later to force through the closure of mills. After threatening to substantially reduce earnings with the GWW, Grosvenor Place once more used lucrative redundancy cheques to target sections of a battle-weary workforce still suffering the financial implications of a prolonged industrywide stoppage.

The story of the abandonment of Bilston steelworks extends our knowledge of management behaviour and privilege. BSC's conduct was unbecoming of a public sector organisation that had an explicit legal and moral responsibility for the social wellbeing of each of their employees. It is, therefore, little surprise that a historical resentment towards Monty 'Finish 'em', 'Mr Pastry', 'Black Bob', 'Captain Bumblington', 'Mother Hubbard', 'Mac the Knife' and the 'Sheffield Mafia' is still

exhibited by many ex-steelmen, even today. Older members of the community, meanwhile, choose to refer to the defunct works as 'Stewart & Lloyd's' – but never British Steel.

This communal reinterpretation of the past provides an insight into Bilstonians' relationship with their lost industrial heritage. The experience of public ownership was extremely traumatic and, by seemingly erasing the memory of BSC, local inhabitants have sought to heal old wounds. Instead, they have rearranged their collective memories around the S&L era: a golden age of steel that was defined by high wages, zero unemployment and an altruistic form of paternal ownership. Local attempts to symbolically revive the old socio-economic order points to how communities collectively remember – or misremember – a series of defined historical events. This phenomenon, in the words of Donald A. Ritchie, discloses efforts, "to make sense of the past and to place their stories into some historical context".⁴ Memory is an active, fluid process and the ITSOE community project, by redefining public memory and inspiring a new collective conscience, has provided an opportunity for Bilstonians of all ages to look back at the final years of iron and steelmaking with a sense of communal pride.

Another core aim of this thesis was to assess the adequacy of institutional responses to rationalisation and, in turn, how trade union policy at national level affected the activities of their rank and file. It has been demonstrated how the reaction to pre-crisis closure proposals were utterly ineffectual, thereby establishing a precedent for the remainder of the decade. Union Executives consequently compounded the situation

⁴ D.A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, (Oxford, 2015), p. 22.

by recognising and conceding to management's 'bigger is better' rationale. In doing so, they adopted a policy of acquiescence, wilfully complying with Grosvenor Place's attendant rationalisation narrative. Long before the crisis arrived at the industry's door, the steel unions should have produced an alternative hybrid development strategy, urging policymakers to invest in all commercially viable units, regardless of size or location. Instead, these ideologically conservative institutions meekly complied, adopting the same pro-establishment, pro-management outlook they had exhibited since their formation by the Government half a century prior.

Although some form of retrenchment was patently necessary, the unions' stance merely encouraged and then facilitated the unnecessary abandonment of profitable installations such as Bilston. In a bid to appease anxious members, officials adopted a futile 'alternative employment' position. This strategy of deferment, however, was exposed by an economic crisis which saw the collapse of mechanisms established to attract fresh industries to steel ghost towns.

Overall trade union policy was initially masterminded by Dai Davies. An archaic and obtuse figure, he displayed very little compassion for those members facing uncertain futures. His refusal to endorse the NAC, support individual local defence campaigns or champion Bilston's potentially lifesaving double-ended firing proposal caused great consternation in the Black Country, with conventionally moderate shop stewards calling for his head. Although Davies retired on the eve of the crisis, his policy of acquiescence would outlive him. The appointment of his former Deputy, Bill Sirs, suggested a new, more robust phase in the struggle against structural rationalisation. He seemingly brought a newfound resilience to union headquarters, confronting

management prerogative in the press and temporarily thwarting unilateral moves to expedite previously deferred closure dates. The new man also sought to unite the TUCSICC, an institution that had previously suffered from prolonged and damaging bouts of infighting.

Frustratingly, this all proved to be a false dawn. Ignoring the rhetoric, Sirs prolonged those defective strategies implemented under his predecessor by committing to the April 1973 national resolution. Moreover, despite advocating a closer working relationship with WACs, he categorically refused to support any one particular defence campaign over the other – regardless of merit. Bereft of ideas, he accepted management prerogative by signing a productivity deal which legitimised BSC's inbuilt overmanning myth. This willingness to submit to managerial control conforms with Richard Hyman's edict in his classic study of British trade unions:

Yet if the union official sees orderly industrial relations as essential for stable bargaining relationships with employers and ultimately for union security, his viewpoint in many respects parallels that of management ... Job control, as it primarily concerns the 'union-as-an-organisation' (and hence the official as the main guardian of organisational interests) is therefore concerned more with stabilising the detail of the relationship between labour and capital than with conducting a struggle against the domination of capital. Such control may thus involve the suppression of irregular and disruptive activities by the rank and file which challenge managerial control.⁵

⁵ Hyman, *Industrial Relations*, p. 91.

With management cutting a hasty but temporary retreat in the wake of Scarborough, the steel unions were presented with another opportunity to discard their firefighting approach. At this stage they still could have pooled their resources to construct an alternative development plan that retained viable non-Beswick plants such as Bilston and Consett. Yet the TUCSICC remained in a state of fractured impotence. The case of the steel unions illustrates what Robert Taylor has identified as the very real “dangers of fragmentation”:

Our protracted economic crisis has highlighted many defects in British trade unions. The dangers of fragmentation are real. There is an often unappealing sectional self-interest about the motives of union leaders as well as their members. Few think beyond the parameters of their own union ... the chaos of multi-unionism means the British trade union ‘movement’ is ill-prepared to modernise. The very inter-union divisions undermine union effectiveness.⁶

Following the desertion of the Steel Committee, it was left to the Confederation to safeguard Bilston. Sirs’ final intervention was emblematic of his first five years in office: a haphazard and feeble plan that functioned as a sop to anxious members. Like his predecessor, the General Secretary was a product of his institutional environment. Under his leadership, the ISTC continued to adopt a pro-establishment position; willingly sacrificing tens of thousands of members on the altar of technological advancement. He was, like Davies, only interested in protecting members at the Big Five – as evidenced by the urgency in which he scrambled to organise the Steel Appeal protest.

⁶ Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 338.

The thesis has provided a critical appraisal of institutional behaviour both before and during the crisis. By scrutinising the response of trade union hierarchies to rationalisation, it reveals how the actions of ideologically conservative, pro-management organisations harmed the prospects of rank and file members at plant-level.

This study has also critically examined how ordinary workers adjust, organise and resist to both the decline of their industry and their unions. A key objective was to determine and appraise the strategic framework adopted by an informal rank and file protest group formed at Bilston.

Tactically fluid and strikingly pragmatic, the BJUAC masterminded three distinct strategic phases during their decade-long campaign of defence. The first witnessed shop stewards achieve success by focusing on their works' impressive financial record. Frustrated by the ambivalence demonstrated by union headquarters, they enlisted an influential political lobby to do their bidding. Spearheaded by patron Bob Edwards, the Bilston men convinced sympathetic policymakers to absorb their plant into the industry's medium-term operating plans in both May 1973 and January 1975. Although the arrival of the crisis threatened to undermine their case for retention, Bilston's diligent steelmen responded by adapting long-established workplace practices. These efforts, which preserved their proud financial record, persuaded management to again absorb the Black Country facility into their updated five-year plan. However, with the industry badly mismanaged – and the crisis set to return – Bilston continued to be vulnerable.

The mothballing of Elisabeth prompted a tactical transition. Forced into a lossmaking situation, the BJUAC argued on commercial and industrial lines. Looking to take advantage of existing consultative arrangements, they presented an incredibly sophisticated homegrown plan which called for new steelmaking facilities to exploit the lucrative Midlands carbon steels market. After a vastly altered political climate led to the rejection of the first bid, the BJUAC broadened their already considerable external support base by cultivating a closer working relationship with the steel unions. They also recruited a team of industry experts and prestigious academic institutions to prepare a revolutionary new counterproposal. The dynamic action committee and their supporters simultaneously participated in extra-workplace direct actions; organising several high-profile public demonstrations and a national PR exercise that exposed the intellectual weaknesses of management's rationalisation programme. The rejection of the Q-BOP proposal, nevertheless, forced the Bilston men to transition to the third and final strategic phase: forlornly pursuing a public inquiry into the social implications of closure. By this stage, however, defeat was inevitable.

It is imperative we now briefly address criticisms levelled at the action committee leadership for its chosen strategic approach, as well as some of its more controversial actions. Firstly, the BJUAC's overreliance on political elites has been queried by some local commentators. There is no denying that, between February 1972 and March 1978, shop stewards depended heavily on a regional lobby who, despite extending the plant's lifespan, failed to secure major investment. This was certainly the case during the Beswick Review, when there was a much more favourable economic and political climate and Bob Edwards had the ear of the Labour peer, Tony Benn and

other key Whitehall officials. The steel crisis, followed by the publication of the Road to Viability four years later, thereby exposed the vulnerability of this strategy. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, without the assistance of Black Country MPs and local authority figures, it is unlikely the works would have been absorbed into BSC's medium-term operating plans in either April 1973 or January 1975.

There have also been retrospective attacks made against the BJUAC – and Dennis Turner in particular – for exploiting the campaign for their own professional and personal gain. The battle for Bilston works did represent something of a debutante's ball for the ambitious young Turner, providing him with an opportunity to network with influential labour movement leaders, and a platform from which to contest three separate general elections. Nevertheless, he was, with or without the campaign, always destined to enter the national political arena, having been schooled by his mentor for over two decades. Moreover, Turner's enduring popularity amongst constituents wasn't defined exclusively by his work as BJUAC Chair, but also his longstanding role as a devoted activist, community leader, local Government official and co-operator.

The decision to tie the campaign's fate with steel union officials – and Bill Sirs – has been placed under the microscope by former colleagues. Although this tactical manoeuvre did little to prevent the plant's downfall, the pragmatic Bilston men had very few options following the rejection of the JWP report. Unlike colleagues at larger facilities, they neither possessed the numbers nor the organising capacity to isolate themselves from union headquarters. Instead, an idealistic BJUAC leadership believed they could drive national policy from within. As this thesis has uncovered:

they were mistaken. In the case of Turner, his close working relationship with Sirs, particularly in the wake of defeat, naturally irked some of his more indignant colleagues. However, as an ISTC stalwart who possessed an unshakeable institutional fidelity, the action committee Chairman's true allegiances were with his trade union and not necessarily its leader. As an MP, Turner continued to lobby on behalf of the Confederation long after Sirs' retirement, proudly retaining his union membership card in the process. In *Labour History and Labour Movement in Britain*, Sidney Pollard identified how some rank and file workers demonstrate an extraordinary degree of commitment to their trade union:

There was something here clearly beyond immediate self-interest: there seemed to be devotion to the ideal, such as is perhaps found in national patriotism – but that emerged only as a result of the massive propaganda of the modern state which pervades the whole society from school age onwards. The unions did not dispose of comparable powers to influence minds or enforce conformity, yet they seemed to be similarly able to evoke string loyalties. Leaders devoting their lives to the trade union cause showed even greater idealism. Sometimes the cause was that of their narrow trade; but commonly there was also a sense of solidarity with working people as a whole.⁷

In the case of Turner, such conduct is entirely consistent with his own personal philosophy as an institutional loyalist and should be admired, not denounced retrospectively.

⁷ S. Pollard, *Labour History and the Labour Movement in Britain* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. xi-xii.

The final issue to address is the more serious charge of autocracy. There was, of course, the notorious September 1977 resolution, which Turner himself later conceded could be perceived as being misleading. Further evidence also points to how, during the final anarchic stage of the campaign, the BJUAC leadership cajoled vulnerable co-workers with duplicitous claims of reduced redundancy payments. Moreover, some decisions, including the controversial plant takeover, were carried out after calls for a secret written ballot had been rejected. Then, with the workforce dividing into two separate factions, overzealous action committee supporters involved themselves in unsavoury altercations with colleagues they had disparagingly branded 'head turners' and 'cut and runners'. Yet, for the most part of the decade-long defence, the BJUAC acted with transparency and, crucially, with a legitimate mandate.

A key element of this thesis has been to ascertain the degree of shop-floor support at various stages of the campaign. During the first two strategic phases, the action committee leadership was enthusiastically backed by the vast majority of a workforce driven by a sense of moral outrage. Accordingly, they successfully tempered any early signs of dissension by establishing open lines of communication with rank and file workers. The BJUAC were also cognisant of the importance of securing the backing of formal shop-floor institutions, with individual and joint union branches, as well as the Works Council, regularly reaffirming their support. Although the two-part resolution admittedly proved to be an area of contention at the very end, workers had voted it through on numerous occasions via mass meetings or at branch-level. Notwithstanding any such controversy, the motion proved a vital tool: an antidote to management's golden handshake clause.

Anyone familiar with Dennis Turner would be aware that coercion or intimidation were not traits he had displayed across his career. Political scientist Dennis Kavanagh once described his lobbying style as, “‘If it’s not too much trouble, do you think you could possibly ...?’ With an avuncular manner, shaking hands and draping an arm around the shoulder of MPs, he was effective”.⁸ A superb orator who possessed incredible powers of personal communication, he was able to woo even the greatest sceptics to one of his many causes. Forthright in his views, but diplomatic in tone, he was a unifying figure who repeatedly brought together the shop-floor despite the divisive actions of management. Herein lies the true success of his leadership.

Today, the works, the BJUAC and the SWWC may have all gone but their legacy continues. Politically, Bilston remains a Labour Party stronghold, contrasting with the shift towards the populist right that has occurred in de-industrialised communities elsewhere. Current MP for Wolverhampton South East, Pat McFadden, as a disciple of New Labour and a non-native, initially struggled to win over working-class Bilstonians. However, after receiving an endorsement from the Turner brothers, Tony Blair’s Parliamentary Undersecretary went onto cement his place within the community – despite now having a reduced overall majority. McFadden reflects on how Dennis, by personally advocating his election bid, helped him build rapport with voters.

Rarely could a politician have been so familiar with his constituency. His encyclopaedic knowledge came from a lifetime of living there, an uncanny memory for names and faces, his work as a Betterware salesman, his campaign for the steel works, and the long years he spent as a councillor and

⁸ *The Guardian*, 27 February 2014.

MP. A walk down Bilston High Street with Dennis took a long time, as a constant stream of people came up to say hello, tell him their news, and pass the time of day.⁹

With the Springvale now gone, Bilston Labour Club has become the town's solitary political hub. The political culture of steel nonetheless remains, with former plant employees still sitting on its board of Governors and many of the current crop of civic leaders influenced by those 'men of steel' who came before them. This is certainly the case in Bilston East, the former of ward of the Turner brothers. Councillor Stephen Simkins, inspired by their unique brand of 'community socialism' when growing up, became Bert's young apprentice on the Council. Meanwhile, by helping to raise the local BAME community's political consciousness, the Turners provided a platform from which second and third generation migrants could participate in local Government. Rupinderjit Kaur, Councillor for the Spring Vale ward, has continued the work of her predecessors by facilitating training schemes for young unemployed adults.

The CLP's enduring influence in the area can be explained by Gregor Gall's concept of community-based collectivism. His work on the Scottish labour movement contends that, if the political identity of a town and its inhabitants is deep-rooted enough, it will survive the adverse socio-economic impacts of de-industrialisation.¹⁰ Clark's aforementioned study into the Lee Jeans campaign, meanwhile, has also demonstrated how the long-established regional traditions of popular protest and rank

⁹ Reeves and Chevannes, *Real Labour*, p. 87.

¹⁰ G. Gall, Trade Unionism and Industrial Relations in Scotland since UCS, *Scottish Labour History*, 238 (2003), pp. 51-74.

and file trade unionism can be maintained in the post-industrial period.¹¹ This is most certainly the case in Bilston, where the political legacy of Sam Hague, John Baker, Benjamin Bilboe, Bob Edwards and the Turner brothers endures.

The work of the SWWC also lives on in those social and cultural institutions they either helped to establish or worked tirelessly to safeguard. When agreeing to sell the club to the Co-operative Group, the co-operators ensured all adjoining recreational facilities remained as public entities. Meanwhile, Bilston Community Centre, Bradley Senior Citizen's Centre, the Good Shepherd Resource Shelter, the Haven Refuge, the Bert Williams Leisure Centre, Bilston Town Hall, the Gazebo and Wolverhampton Grand Theatres all remain in one capacity or another, whilst an annual 'Dennis Turner Opportunity Fund' provides financial support to disadvantaged students. In *Real Labour*, Frank Reeves and Mel Chevannes reflect on the longstanding impact of Turner's community work:

The new phoenix-like Bilston is, in reality, the lifetime work of one man, transfixed by the revelation that the key to his neighbourhood's future economic prosperity lay in being fiercely proud of one's working-class roots and industrial heritage, and in retaining and valuing one's hard-won local identity. Unlike Mrs Thatcher, Dennis believed in and treasured 'community'. Bilston, to him, was far more than the set of buildings, streets and alleyways described above. It was a vibrant pulsating community, whose love of life was displayed on a daily basis in the comfort and affection of its homesteads, the neighbourly greeting and gossip on its street, the bonhomie of its clubs, pubs, and day centres, the

¹¹ Clark, *And the next thing*, pp. 119-120.

banter of its market traders, and the wry humour and solidarity of its workplaces.

Dennis venerated the vigour and vitality of his Bilston community and drew his strength and sense of purpose from its long-established roots.¹²

One of the SWWC's final gifts to Bilston was helping to secure funding for a sculpture park that celebrates the town's industrial heritage. The first piece, named Witness, features excerpts from an oral history interview conducted with one participant prior to his death:

But we're still here, and Bilston has still got that pride that was so dented. We knew they wouldn't take that away from us, because we are people of steel. You know, it's our history, and we're resilient, and we had to be resilient ... they're [Bilstonians] lovely people, and they're in the main happy people, for all we had those bouts of unhappiness, and there was such unhappiness caused by the closure of this plant; but we're still here to tell the tale.¹³

In the Shadow of Elisabeth and Workers' Mobilisation Literature:

Both historical and contemporary researchers have tended to narrowly focus their scholarly gaze on the new forms of radical shop-floor protest that emerged throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Inevitably, there are several parallels between those works and this thesis.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹³ Documenting the Workshop of the World, 2007, WCA, LS/LB6/2, pp. 22-23.

Like our study, Charles Woolfson and John Foster's comprehensive and empirically weighted account of the UCS sit-in places a rank and file anti-closure campaign in the contexts of the changing political and socio-economic environs of post-war Britain. In doing so, the rank and filists offer an instructive appraisal of the impact successive Governments' industrial and fiscal policies had on shop-floor experiences. Moreover, *The Politics of the UCS Work-In* also identifies how the commercial failings of company bosses negatively impacted the prospects of local workers. Similarly, *From Workplace Occupation to Mass Imprisonment*, Stephen Mustchin's piece on a four-month workers' occupation of Cammell Laird's Birkenhead facility, provides an account of how long-term structural issues, malinvestment and defunding left domestic shipbuilding in a "parlous state".¹⁴ In another piece examining an anti-closure protest at a struggling engine plant in Manchester, the author determines the manner in which management deliberately undermined commercial performance in order to force through mass compulsory redundancies. *Conflict, Mobilisation, and Deindustrialisation* subsequently illustrates how, by emulating the earlier actions of senior BSC officials at Bilston, "controlling, authoritarian" company bosses "circumvented union structures" before overseeing a "campaign of intimidation" on the factory floor.¹⁵ Indeed, management prerogative is a reoccurring theme in studies of de-industrialisation and worker mobilisation.

Another commonality with these investigations and this thesis is the heightened political awareness of those individuals spearheading the respective protests. Mustchin, for example, establishes how, after being marginalised by apathetic trade

¹⁴ Mustchin, *From Workplace Occupation*, p. 39.

¹⁵ Mustchin, *Conflict, Mobilisation, and De-Industrialisation*, p. 151 and p. 160.

union bureaucrats at national level, “politicised” Gardner employees tied themselves with regional SWP and CPGB officials.¹⁶ Likewise, shop stewards at Cammell Laird were politicised by their plant takeover and subsequent imprisonment. As was the case with Dennis Turner, campaign leaders sought to enter mainstream politics, with shipbuilder Lol Duffy competing in the 1987 general election on a socialist ticket.

However, notwithstanding these thematic consistencies, it must be stressed that the experiences presented in these studies contrast sharply from those of Bilston’s steelmen. The most obvious difference is the political and industrial relations landscapes these workplace protests took place in – which, in turn, impacted tactical considerations. The 1971/72 UCS sit-in, for example, occurred as a response to Edward Heath’s early *laissez faire* industrial and economic strategies, with Woolfson and Foster noting how organisers, exploiting widespread resentment caused by the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, were able to place enough political pressure on the Tory Government to bailout their struggling company. Nevertheless, most studies on late twentieth century rank and file anti-closure protests look at events that took place in the 1980s; usually as a response to multinational firms seeking to cut labour costs by shipping production abroad.

This, in turn, greatly impacted the nature of the struggles, which evolved to become broad-based ‘right to work’ demonstrations against “Government policy, job losses and de-industrialisation”, rather than merely localised, plant-level protests.¹⁷ In the case of those occurring in Scotland, leaders adopted what scholars have described as a

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

“national orientation”, defining struggles as “all Scotland” demonstrations.¹⁸ At Caterpillar’s Uddingston facility, for example, Woolfson and Foster have established how this phenomenon manifested itself in a unique form of “tartan solidarity”, with leaders targeting their American owners with the campaign slogan: ‘How Can Yanks Kill Us Off?’.¹⁹ By tapping into growing calls for economic and political nationalism, local assembly workers were able to build an “alliance of forces” in their fight for jobs; establishing a much wider – and influential – support network than the one assembled by the BJUAC.²⁰ Assistance initially came from the apex of the institutional labour movement, with local leaders benefitting from the backing of the highest levels of the Scottish TUC. Those campaigns taking place elsewhere in the UK would also profit from closer relations with regional and national union elites, many of whom suddenly demonstrated a sense of urgency that was absent from the fight for jobs in steel only a decade earlier.

Meanwhile, organisers could now draw on the solidarity of a British shop-floor movement that had finally been roused by the prospect of unprecedented job losses, as well as simultaneous attacks on workers’ rights under the guise of the Tory Government’s draconian 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts. In the case of the Garner dispute, Mustchin outlines the strength of rank and file support:

Visits to Gardner by activists from elsewhere included steelworkers who gave advice based on experiences of the 1980 steel strike; a delegation from Govan

¹⁸ Foster and Woolfson, *Track Record*, p. 23 and p. 111.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84 and p. 94.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

shipyards including Jimmy Reid and Sam Gilmour, visited in solidarity and to pass on collections from their respective workplaces ... Workers from a wide range of engineering, steel, shipbuilding, mining, and public-sector workplaces in Sheffield, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Huddersfield, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, Newcastle, south Wales, and London pledged solidarity and financial support.²¹

As wide-reaching protests, these 1980s campaigns successfully also tapped into a diverse and popular support base far removed from the traditional labour movement. In *Track Record*, Woolfson and Foster examine how employees were assisted by the owners of Rangers and Celtic football clubs, their fans, community groups and even activist musician Bob Geldolf. Such patronage enabled organisers to achieve a far greater degree of exposure and subsequently, “touched a mighty chord of public sympathy”.²² Likewise, Andy Clark, in his study of the 1981 anti-closure sit-in at the VF Corporation’s Lee Jeans factory in Greenock, outlined the way women workers became “cause celebres” who achieved a huge amount of exposure.²³ A year earlier, protesting engineers at the Gardner plant, establishing a ‘publicity committee’, were able to conduct a successful propaganda war involving the distribution of biweekly newsletters and approximately 150,000 leaflets across the North West.²⁴ When reviewing the popularity of these campaigns, it is clear the sharp rise in unemployment rates, which often exceeded 3 million in the early 1980s, prompted a degree of public support not witnessed in the previous decade, when Bilston’s steelmen were fighting for their livelihoods.

²¹ Mustchin, *Conflict, Mobilisation, and De-Industrialisation*, pp. 160-161.

²² Foster and Woolfson, *Track Record*, p. 51.

²³ Clark, *And the next thing*, p. 124.

²⁴ Mustchin, *Conflict, Mobilisation, and De-Industrialisation*, p. 160.

With later campaigns successfully capturing the imagination of ordinary working-class voters, elected officials were impelled to intervene. In the case of the Cammell Laird occupation, strike leaders enjoyed an intimate working relationship with Militant-linked civic leaders who, in an act of solidarity, organised a 24-hour sympathy strike that involved thousands of public sector employees. At Lee Jeans, employees were able to procure the lobbying expertise of Tony Benn, George Galloway and Michael Foot. Similarly, it has been established that Caterpillar employees, garnering, “support from all sectors of the political spectrum in Scotland”, developed a powerful cross-party lobby.²⁵

Having established an extensive and multifaceted support base, under threat workers were able to coordinate a much more proactive campaign than the one undertaken by Bilston’s steelmen. The strength of emotional, political and financial backing facilitated the adoption of much more confrontational overall strategic frameworks which centred on the use of strikes, working-to-rule, sit-ins and other forms of plant occupation. Yet it must be remembered, these radical forms of industrial action were never feasible within the public sector steel industry, as they would have pre-empted the closure of facilities by Government backed industry officials who not only controlled supply lines, but also monopolised the domestic market. Even if this wasn’t the case, this thesis has demonstrated that there was little appetite for such forms of workplace protest amongst steel union bureaucrats.

²⁵ Foster and Woolfson, *Track Record*, p. 48.

This is not to suggest that the tactics implemented by WACs elsewhere within BSC mirrored those of the BJUAC. Reconsidering the limited post-war labour historiography of steelworker mobilisation, the work of David Stewart demonstrates that, in the mid-1980s, another Government-backed plan to close Ravenscraig was successfully thwarted by the so-called 'Scottish lobby'. Representing the, "final symbol of Scottish industrial virility", the author reveals that the fight for jobs was led by the Standing Committee for the Defence of the Scottish Steel Industry, a broad-based, cross-party interest group who fought a largely political campaign that argued for the retention of the lossmaking facility on social lines.²⁶ In doing so, Stewart highlights the role of Scottish Conservative Party officials, as well as STUC leaders who, as the "lynchpin" of the struggle, functioned as an, "organisational hub, coordinating the Scottish consensus with considerable skill and tact".²⁷ Yet, by focusing exclusively on the institutional aspects of the fight for steelmaking, the political historian's narrow, top-down study completely mutes the voices of local workers.

Whilst Allen Maunders' first-hand account of the fight at Corby works is, on the other hand, an impressive study of rank and filism in steel, it also reveals a significantly different experience to that of Bilston. *A Process of Struggle* also determines how this purpose built mono-town's socio-cultural setting directly impacted the strategic direction of the campaign, with participants steeped in a tradition of popular protest that had been imported from Scotland's industrial heartlands.²⁸ With the fortunes of

²⁶ Stewart, *Fighting for Survival*, p. 49.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁸ With the opening of a fully-integrated greenfield iron, steel and tube works by S&L in 1934, thousands of unemployed Clyde Valley steelworkers flocked to the sleepy rural Northamptonshire town. Referred to as 'Little Scotland', approximately one-third of Corby's population were Scottish born by the time the industry was nationalised in the late 1960s. This seismic demographic shift manifested itself in a unique

the works explicitly linked to the life of the town, it was decided that, “since the threatened closure would affect the wider community, then they should be drawn into the struggle, (and that the campaign) ... was too important to be restricted to the works”.²⁹ The result was a local battle that was “primarily one of activists” who, in contrast to the BJUAC, pushed a, “special pleading, social consequences line of argument; the community case” for almost the entirety of the campaign.³⁰ Moreover, community leaders, initially unshackled by the institutional labour movement, independently plotted a sophisticated ‘Save Steel, Save Corby’ PR exercise that featured an array of imaginative workplace and extra-workplace direct actions.³¹

Another key variance to the battle for Bilston was the apathy of a workforce whose internal fragmentation persistently undermined the propaganda war being coordinated away from the shop-floor. Described by Maunders as a “struggle within a struggle”, the fight for tube and steelmaking was repeatedly overshadowed by fraternal and

collective cultural identity, with the town hosting an annual Highland Gathering that attracts thousands of local inhabitants.

²⁹ Maunders, *A Process of Struggle*, p. 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. x and p. 32.

³¹ Under the supervision of ROSAC’s publicity subdivision, a team of local artist-activists coordinated a wide range of vibrant community schemes. Led by award-winning painter, Bryan Blumer, they designed a range of unique promotion materials such as lapel badges, car stickers and t-shirts. Meanwhile, a group known as the ‘phantom painters’ broke into the works and graffitied ‘Save our Steel’ on the facility’s huge, landmark gas holders, whilst a cohort of writers published a regular newsletter titled ‘*The Steelfight News*’. Seeking to draw national media and wider public attention to their struggle, campaign leaders organised several publicity stunts including the staged kidnapping of comedian Dora Bryan, the release of a protest album by musician and Northamptonshire native Mick Carver, the launch of a pirate radio station called ‘Atlantis’, and a six-day ‘hunger march’ to Grosvenor Place. The PR campaign was a resounding success, with actor Vanessa Redgrave and punk rock band The Clash lending their support.

political schisms between all grades of worker.³² Adopting a much more confrontational approach than their Black Country colleagues, the Corby action committee (ROSAC) also involved themselves in high-profile clashes with local and national Government figures, senior BSC officials and, inevitably, national union leaders. This culminated in ROSAC supporters, many of whom were women activists, accusing Hector Smith of indulging in an, “arm around the shoulder male chauvinistic act”.³³ Meanwhile, ISTC-affiliated shop stewards, exhibiting and institutional infidelity that contrasted with their fraternal brothers within the BJUAC, openly mocked their General Secretary for being a “queer fella”.³⁴

Indeed, with the bulk of the campaign centring on “community participation”, the assistance of union headquarters was not called upon until it reached its apex in September 1979, when Bob Scholey threatened to unilaterally post a 12-month rundown letter at the lossmaking facility.³⁵ Despite deep reservations, this prompted ROSAC leaders to become more union oriented, “moving steadily and more firmly into formal engagement with BSC management through the trade unions and, in particular, the TUC Steel Committee”.³⁶ It is only at this final stage that *A Process of Struggle*, and the activities of Corby’s protesting steelworkers, begin to mirror those outlined in this thesis. With the Northamptonshire plant’s fate now firmly in the hands of apathetic and disorganised national steel union officials, a familiar pattern emerged:

³² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

1. Assisted by a team of academics recruited by ROSAC, Dennis Delay produced a paper summarising calls for the retention of the Northampton facility for commercial reasons;
2. With the paper rejected by obdurate industry officials and a formal closure notice posted, desperate workers sought to coordinate an eleventh-hour furnace reline and plant takeover;
3. Responding to local pressure, Sirs forlornly lobbied the EEC, before publicly declaring “we are in dispute” with Grosvenor House over Corby;
4. Despite this public proclamation, the TUCSICC Chair and his colleagues refused to answer desperate calls for a national stoppage.

The result of this process left ROSAC horribly exposed and Corby’s beleaguered workforce were eventually lured by the prospect of a golden handshake:

There remained two major and continuing concerns ... the lure of redundancy payments and the poor state of repair in some threatened areas of the plant. Both were seen as weakening support at local level and potentially fatal in any attempt to keep the workforce even nominally behind the fight once the formal closure date was announced.³⁷

A frustratingly familiar tale!

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

The Significance of *In the Shadow of Elisabeth*:

This thesis represents a vital contribution to the historiography of rank and file trade unionism and workers' mobilisation. Locality is key. Frustratingly, Black Country workers remain marginalised by academia: erroneously viewed as a passive and disorganised mass. Historians have continued to cast their scholarly gaze towards regions whose inhabitants are deemed to possess a proclivity for radical collective action. The post-war labour historiography continues to be dominated by studies of workers who are deemed to possess a more heightened working-class consciousness: the Welsh coalminer, the Liverpoolian docker and the Upper Clyde shipbuilder, to name but a few.

The submission of this thesis coincides with the three-decade anniversary of local historian John Benson expressing his frustration at the paucity of work on this disregarded region. Yet his call to arms had very little impact, with a frustratingly limited body of work still governed by a small cohort of literary icons idly overstating the submissiveness of their subjects. That is until now. By providing a voice to the hitherto overlooked post-war Black Country steelworker, *In the Shadow of Elisabeth* has offered the reader a detailed insight into the complexities of industrial change and, more importantly, processes of working-class organisation in the erstwhile workshop of the world.

Contrasting with earlier top-down studies of steel, this survey has handed full political agency to ordinary men who engaged in extraordinary, solidaristic collective direct action in a spirited fight for the right to work. Previously forgotten, the battle for Bilston

represents a crucial chapter in the history of the domestic labour movement. Signifying the longest and most extensive industrial and political grassroots campaign witnessed in steel – and, indeed, the West Midlands – the real impetus came from the shop-floor and not the corridors of power at the centre. A story of recession and retrenchment, it features exceptional acts of resistance undertaken by rank and file workers facing intolerable injustices.

There are a number of lessons that can be learnt from the events that took place in Bilston throughout the 1970s; the principal one being that the ongoing fight for workers' rights must be grassroots in nature. The courage and determination of Bilston's rank and file reminds us that, if ordinary labouring men don't collectivise to resist mass unemployment, then all powerful elites will reign supreme. Abandoned by the very institutions that were tasked with protecting them, local steelmen bravely navigated a hostile industrial and political terrain, deploying a full range of skills during a sophisticated and multifaceted decade-long campaign of resistance. The action committee and their supporters could have done little else to safeguard the industrial culture and heritage of their beloved community.

Disregarding the inevitable outcome, this study demonstrates that with unity comes strength: only together can we control our own destinies – a lesson that is as pertinent today as it was all those years ago. *In the Shadow of Elisabeth*, therefore, stands as a permanent tribute to the people of Bilston – their working lives, their industriousness, their perseverance, their audacity and, above all, their spirit; all of which couldn't be extinguished even after the closure of their works. They were – and continue to be – people of steel.

This thesis has utilised an interdisciplinary methodology that has benefitted from a rich and varied primary source base. Accessing pre-existing – yet largely unexplored – documentary material locked away in formal archive settings permitted a comprehensive survey of institutional activity at the centre. The WCA and MRC collections not only widen our understanding of the behaviour of the state, capital and management, but also the activities of the institutional labour movement *vis-à-vis* ordinary members. Any concerns over the top-down perspective furnished by these officially sanctioned organisational collections were assuaged by the aforementioned frontline community project. ITSOE's archive collection, established following a sustained process of stakeholder engagement, allowed the reconstruction of rank and file activity at Bilston during the anti-closure campaign. Of significance were a large volume of documents produced by local trade unionists – personal correspondence, diaries and minute books – which helped determine the overall strategic framework adopted by local shop stewards throughout their decade-long fight for jobs. Whereas this informal collection at least provided an antidote to the one-dimensional nature of traditional depositories, they still only represented a partial account of what is an incredibly complex narrative.

Seeking to fill this discernible empirical void, the author delved into the ITSOE oral history collection. By revealing what everyday life was like on Bilston's shop-floor during a period of retrenchment, the personal testimonies extend our knowledge of the impact de-industrialisation has on ordinary workers. Moreover, by helping to gauge the mindset of local steelmen at various stages of the campaign, these reminiscences deepen our understanding of workers mobilisation against plant closures and mass

redundancy. When combined with the documentary source material accessed in both formal and informal collections, they have enabled the adoption of a methodical and empirically rich analysis of both institutional and rank and file conduct.

Despite prompting an intimate and microscopic account of the battle for Bilston works, *In the Shadow of Elisabeth's* methodological underpinnings are not without flaws. It must be stressed that, even after an extensive and multidimensional process of community outreach by the author, the interview sample was restricted to the sole surviving member of the BJUAC and their staunch supporters. The activist orientation of interviewees explicitly defines the narrative of the thesis, leaving a discernible thematic gap. This was not for any lack of desire. The handful of traceable ex-steelmen who had become dissenting figures during the campaign were less inclined to offer their personal testimonies, with at least one displaying unease over the ramifications of criticising campaign leaders and Dennis Turner in particular. Many migrant and women employees, meanwhile, failed to answer the interview call, perhaps feeling their recollections were of little merit. In this sense, some voices remain muted and questions unanswered.

Those topics that have, therefore, fallen beyond the scope of this broad-church thesis warrant further scholarly attention. As has been repeatedly asserted, the BJUAC enjoyed widespread support until the final stage of the battle for steelmaking, when a sizeable contingent of the wider workforce became disillusioned with the direction of the stuttering campaign. The voices of these so-called 'cut and runners' and their leaders, the 'head turners', have been largely excluded from our narrative. Any future study into the battle of Bilston should seek to accurately establish what specifically

motivated these dissenting figures. How did they interact with the BJUAC and their diehard supporters, and in what forms did they demonstrate their opposition to the direction of the campaign? Likewise, how were they viewed by the wider community, both in the immediate aftermath of closure and in the long-term?

Another topic worthy of extensive enquiry is the role played by marginalised participants. Once again, this thesis has only momentarily discussed the activities of Bilston's female employees. Any future study should, therefore, seek to establish what prompted them to actively participate in the anti-closure struggle and how, in their view, they were regarded by their male counterparts. Moreover, the personal experiences of the wives of Bilston's steelmen, both during and after the battle to save the plant's heavy-end, warrants further investigation. How did they participate? In what way did they support the financial impact of the GWW or the three-month steel strike? How did redundancy and long-term employment impact domestic life and the family unit?

An additional minority group deserving of their own detailed study is Bilston's BAME workforce, a sizeable cohort that included some of the BJUAC's most enthusiastic and passionate supporters. Why did these men, many of whom arrived from the Indian subcontinent in the 1950s and 1960s, participate in the struggle with such enthusiasm? Did their experiences of the independence struggle back home impact their decision to participate in collective, direct extra-workplace action? What impact, if any, did the anti-closure campaign have on race relations both inside and outside the confines of the plant? Post-industrial activities could also be documented, with any future studies seeking to measure the impact closure had on political

consciousnesses and social mobility amongst migrant ex-steelworkers. Any such work should be community-centred and involve the collection of oral histories.

Indeed, the long-term experiences of the Black Country's redundant steelmen are currently being recorded by fellow University of Wolverhampton researcher Paul Barnsley, himself the son of a former plant employee. His timely oral history exploring the impact de-industrialisation had on the lives of past and present generations of Black Country residents will complete the narrative of the battle for Bilston iron and steelworks, an epoch-making event that continues to impact the town to this day.

Industria et Lahore Edurat Re Bilstonia.

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